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Allegiance (Spoilers!!!)

[image]

Barn Cats

Cookie - slender black she-cat

Mango - tabby she-cat with white belly and paws

Morris - orange tabby tom

Moose - gray tabby tom

Sully - very fluffy white tom with brown mask and ears and tail

Moonclan

Leader: Dawnstar - white she-cat with rings on tail and brown on ears

Deputy: Patchpelt - black tom with white chest and paws

Medicine Cat(s): Ivybranch - brown tabby she-cat with white paws and chest

Apprentice(s): Berrypaw, Rainpaw, Thornpaw

Warriors:

Mouseclaw - gray tawny tom

Midnightlight - black and silver she-cat

Littleleaf - brown tabby she-cat

Appleblaze - black and white tom

Nightowl - black tom with white patches

Voletail - gray and white tom

Stormbreak - pale ginger tom

Brightmist - orange tawny she-cat

Bramblesun - white tom with black patches

Ivyfeather - White tortoiseshell she-cat

Specklecloud - white and brown she-cat

Cloudpelt - off white tom

Shinningstream - cream she-cat

Queens: Eveningmist - white tortoiseshell she-cat (Kits Firekit and Thunderkit)

Snowsight - silver she-cat with black markings (Flurrykit and Breezekit)

Fernwhisper - gray-blue she-cat with one white paw (Lizzardkit)

Smokeclan

Leader: Thrushstar - Tawny tom

Deputy: Brindleface - brown/black brindle and white tom

Medicine Cat(s): Rainpaw/bright - gray tom

Warriors:

Stormbreeze - silver brindle tom

Apprentice: Dewpaw -

Acornpelt - warm gray tabby she-cat

Oaktail - brown tabby and white tom

Swiftshine - light silver/gray she-cat with dark gray markings

Sparrowflame - red/orange tom

Redmist - russet she-cat with dark brown markings

Keeper (rogue) - tortoiseshell tom

Herontail - black and white tom

Stonesmoke - gray tom

Walnutfall - brown and white she-cat

Pokka Dot (former kittypet) - white she-cat with black spots/ patches

Queens:

Moonpie (former kittypet) - white she-cat with black patches (expecting)

Elders: None

Meadowclan

Leader: Featherstar - dark gray tom

Deputy: Wildheart - russet tom

Medicine Cat(s): Berrypaw/stream - fluffy orange and white she-cat

Warriors:

Wonderfrost

Beetleshade - black and brown she-cat

Apprentice: Snakepaw - brown and black tabby tom

Leaftail - smooth ginger she-cat

Redmoon - russet she-cat

Lightclaw - brown and white she-cat

Mousewhisker - brown tabby tom

Walnutfur - light brown tom with dark markings

Apprentice: Acornpaw - fluffy black tom

Antsnake - black she-cat

Cloudsight - fluffy silvery gray tom

Apprentice: Rabbitpaw - scruffy brown and gray tom

Fawnstripe - fawn tom with white paws and belly

Tallmoon - black and white she-cat

Apprentice: Windpaw - silver and black tom

Queens:

Heatherwind - brindle and white she-cat

Dandelionclaw - fluffy ginger she-cat

Elders:

Silverlight - silver and white she-cat

Deerspot - fawn she-cat with white spots

Stonetail - dark gray tabby tom

Nightwind - silver black she-cat

Mountainclan

Leader: Falconstar - large black tom

Deputy: Rootfoot - dark brown tabby tom

Apprentice: Stonepaw - dark grey/blue tom

Medicine Cat(s): Thornpaw/blink

Warriors:

Blackwhisker - dark brown and black tawny tom

Apprentice: Boulderpaw -

Jaggedtooth - black and brown tom

Berchtail - black and white tom

Creektooth - gray and white she-cat

Marshfall - brown and orange tawny tom

Flamepelt - light gray she-cat with white paws

Apprentice: Driftpaw - tortoiseshell she-cat

Gorsemoon - silver and black she-cat with missing tail

Hickorysight - dark orange tom with one white paw

Bristlefrost - black and brindle tawny she-cat

Sandshadow - dark orange she-cat with white markings

Thistlebranch - black she-cat

Apprentice: Hawkpaw - black tom with white star on chest

Queens:

Duskflight - dark gray she-cat with white face

Iceclaw - light brown she-cat with dark brown stripes

Elders:

Owlwing - brown and black she-cat

Jaycall - dark brown tabby tom

Prologue

[image]

The large white dog sniffed at the unconscious cat laying in his field. He didn't recognize the cat as one of his but couldn't be sure. He looked around the field but only saw his many sheep and goats grazing peacefully. He looked back down and pondered what he should so about the cat because it was clearly still alive. He sat and thought for a while before deciding he would bring the cat back to Master when it was time to bring the sheep and goats home. Yes, he thought. A good plan for a good dog.

The large dog made his way slowly through the fields as he led the sheep and goats back home for the evening. He was a lumbering brute who although as large as the sheep, was kind to the animals on his farm. In his mouth he carried the limp cat gently, trying not to hurt it with his large teeth. Up ahead he saw Master waiting by the open gate to welcome the livestock home. Once all the sheep and goats were safety back in their pens, the white dog padded up to Master and reached out with the limp cat. Master scratched his head and bent down, gingerly taking the cat,

"Good boy Brody," Master patted the big white dog on the head. "This poor thing would surely have died without you my wonderful boy." Brody nodded in agreement and wagged his big log of a tale back and forth. Master reached into his pocket and pulled out a piece of beef jerky he had specially been saving for his boy Brody and handed it to the dog who swallowed it in one slobbery gulp. As Master walked away Brody made his way over to the barn where the hay and feed was stored. He peeked inside and called,

"Hello, it is me, Brody,"

"We know its you, Brody," came the sarcastic voice as a brown tabby she-cat with white paws and a white underbelly emerged from the hay. She shook off the old dried grass and leapt down to the first level of hay and was on Brody's level. Behind her three more cats appeared and came bounding down the wall of hay.

"Good evening good boy," welcomed a long haired white tom with grey across his back and head with striking blue eyes.

"Are any of you guys missing?" Brody asked, looking around.

"Missing?" the long haired tom blinked then looked around to count. "I think we are all here Brody. Why would we be missing?"

"I found a cat in the field today," Brody licked the dirt off his nose and released a breath that smelled strongly of beef jerky. The long haired tom had to focus hard not to cough.

"In the field? Really? Must be a feral," the first she-cat piped up. "Those nasty things just dirty and mean running around out there."

"I brought the cat to Master," Brody offered, not sure if he was still a good boy.

"What did Master do?" The long haired tom asked.

"Took it into the house." Brody shrugged.

"Well Master will know what to do with it. It is probably dead anyway," the she-cat sneered. The cats and Brody sat in silence for a moment before the long haired tom let out a big sigh,

"Anything else Brody?" he asked sweetly.

"Did I do a Good Dog thing?" Brody asked casually.

"Yes Brody." the long haired tom rolled his eyes. "Now go do your thing with the sheep and goats." the big brute of a dog got up and smiled a slobbery smile before reaching out and giving the tom a huge wet lick. With that he turned and left the barn to attend to his flock.

"Gross," the tom muttered to himself as he lifted his paw and felt the sticky slobber against his pads.

"Better you than me." the she-cat laughed.

Chapter 1

[image]

Briarsong looked around from the warm comfy bed by the roaring fire. The smell of burning frightened her at first but the twoleggers seemed to be able to control its temper. She closed her eyes listened to its hissing and spitting and found it strangely comforting. The creaking of an old wood brought her out of her daydream and she looked over to see the littlest twolegger come bounding in like the kits in the nursery use to do. Briarsong had been afraid of it at fist but it liked to bring her little pieces of fish or other treats, and she liked those.

The kit-twolegger slowed down its bouncing, bent down, and with two little claws rubbed them across the top of Briarsong's head. She let out a soft purr and the kit-twolegger seemed to like her reaction to the pets. Briarsong had realized very quickly how much she enjoyed the scratches and pats, especially when she was so weak and sick she couldn't resist them anyway. Sitting up and stretching, Briarsong sniffed the kit-twolegs hand and could smell her favorite treat on her little paws. She let out a soft meow and the girl laughed, searching among her person before pulling out a piece of dried fish skin. Briarsong felt her mouth water and she reached out to gingerly take the treat from its paws, before hunkering down to eat. She had never had food brought to her like this before, and for sure not such delicious food. All this time she had mocked kittypets for being lazy, good for nothing, embarrassments to cats everywhere. Yet, the warmth of fire, the head pats, and the fish skin were nice.

Briarsong did her evening patrol around the twoleg house to make sure all was well. She could hear the raspy snoring of the adult twolegs and the soft sleepy breaths of the kit-twoleg. The evenings were becoming cooler and the windows were open less and less for her to peek out of. She searched around before seeing an open window in the room the twolegs kept their food supply. She leapt up onto the ledge and sat in the open window. The cool night air

wrapped around her with familiar smells of grass, trees, and outside. She crouched down and watched as a large lumbering white form made its way her way before sitting down and looking up at her with big brown eyes.

"Good evening, Brody," Briarsong purred to the dog. She had been frightened of the large white beast for almost a moon before realizing he was a mouse-brained lumbering kitten with no intentions to hurt any animal who lived with the twolegs.

"Hello there, Pearl," Brody called up. Briarsong frowned at the name the kit-twoleg had given her but poor silly Brody couldn't seem to get her name straight.

"How was it outside today?" Briarsong asked, feeling a twinge of longing for a world outside of the walls that confined her.

"It was good. I saw a fox but I chased it off." Brody's slow tail wag made a small thump on the ground as he smiled at himself. "It was warm for a while there. You would have liked it," he woofed.

"I do miss the sun," Briarsong agreed. "In here I only get small amounts before it goes away."

"Why don't you come out here?" Brody suggested, not for the first time. Briarsong let out a long breath and wondered if she would have to explain to him again that she couldn't.

"I don't know if can," she whispered back. Brody looked confused but didn't ponder it too long. He yawned, his large tongue curling and his large fangs revealing themselves. Briarsong watched as he sauntered off to watch his sleeping flock. Looking up at the stars Briarsong once again longed to hear from Starclan. To get any kind of guidance or message about what she should be doing, how Moonclan was, and when they would come for her. The stars were silent and no cats came to visit her from Starclan. The clans and the forest seemed so far away now. Almost like it had been a dream she had awoken from. But did she want to go back, even if she could? Briarsong wasn't sure anymore what she wanted or who she even was. She had never imagined being trapped inside a large cage with twolegs and liking it, or talking to a big dog every night and

enjoying the company. These were things she had never had to worry about or prepare for, so she wasn't sure how she felt. She felt warm, fed, and safe, but with those luxuries came a great sacrifice of freedom.

"Haven't seen you in a while," came the sneering voice from the fence right below the window. Briarsong was shaken out of her deep thought and looked out to see the white and tabby she-cat who lived in the barn.

"Hello Mango." Briarsong mumbled. She didn't like the she-cat but also didn't want to give up her spot in the window.

"Heard anything from your cats who live in the sky?" Mango geared. "Have they flown down to save you yet?"

"Go away Mango." Briarsong warned. Giving the she-cat as nasty a look as she could.

"What? Am I not good enough for you? You think you are better than me because you are inside?"

"You know I can't get out," Briarsong huffed, feeling her fur bristle with frustration at the she-cats aggressive attitude. "Just go away and stop being a bother."

"At least I have my freedom," she boasted, completely ignoring Briarsong. "I don't let the twoleg pet my head and keep me a prisoner. I can hunt for myself and I can fight for my self. I am not lazy like you,"

"You're lucky I can't reach you," Briarsong threatened.

"Why? You think you could fight me kittypet? I would like to see you try."

Briarsong stood up and let out a low growl, and Mango took a few steps back.

"Leave her alone, Mango" came the voice of Sully. The long haired tom who also lived in the barn jumped up next to Mango and gave the she-cat a nasty glare. "Go be mean somewhere else." He waited

as Mango looked from Briarsong to the tom and finally jumped down and padded off, her tail high and flicking in frustration.

"Thank you," Briarsong sighed, letting the hair on her back slowly flatten back down.

"Don't let that mouse-brain bother you," he purred. "she is all hiss not bite. She is just mad you get to sleep by the fire."

"I don't if I want to stay by the fire," Briarsong whispered. "I am so thankful Brody brought me here when I was cold and sick, but I don't know if I can stay within this prison forever."

"It would be nice to hunt with you," he shuffled his paws. "and take strolls around the farm." Briarsong felt her face go hot for a moment and she looked away form his sky blue yes. She had never thought of herself as attractive or interesting to toms but the silence from Starclan had started to make her wonder.

"Can you imagine if Mango actually had to deal with me?" Briarsong tried to change the topic. "It would drive her mad once she realized I'm a better hunter than her."

Sully chuckled "Why don't you come out here and show her then?"

Briarsong frowned, "You know I can't get out of here."

"You could sneak out when the door opens." Sully suggested. "They come and go all day long. It shouldn't be too hard. Come hunt with me. I will show you all the fun things to do around here." his eyes were wide and hopeful but Briarsong shook her head and without another world, jumped down from the window and slinked back into the silent darkness of the house.

Chapter 2

[image]

As the sun rose, Briarsong sat and waited for her usual meal. The twoleg who had taken care of her when she was sick came in and waved at her. He bustled around before finally filling up her small pink bowl with the delicious aroma of fish and chicken. She licked her lips, eager to enjoy the free meal and even gave his hand a little lick when he placed it on the floor. Not having to worry about being hungry anymore, she ate it slowly, enjoying the texture and flavors she had never had out in the forest. When she finished the meal she let out a satisfied purr and started to groom herself. As her paw made its way from her face to her torn ear she stopped and felt the jagged pieces of where the fox had torn her ear. Would Starclan be ashamed of her and that she was eating kittypet food and living inside a twoleg cave? Could she even still be considered a clan cat and go to Starclan when she died? The thought of not seeing Sunheart again brought a sharp pang of pain in her chest. Was everything she had trained for her entire life for nothing? She shook her head wildly trying to get the thoughts to go away.

"What's wrong Pearl," she heard the name the twoleg referred to her by and looked up. She didn't know what he was going on about but she recognized the name they had given her and knew he was talking to her. He made soft cooing sounds and rubbed his claw under her chin with just enough force for it to feel comforting. The fact that she liked it made Briarsong hate herself and she could only imagine what Flowertail and Sunheart would say if they saw her now. The shame made her pull away and bound off and far away from the twoleg who had only shown her kindness.

In a panic she started to run into every room and look for an exit back to the outdoors. Briarsong felt like she couldn't breath and longed for the fresh air and the grass beneath her paws. As she ran in a panicked haste she knocked over many different items and heard them crash to the ground, sending her mind rolling with fear.

The twoleg was suddenly chasing her with its long claws outstretched. Trying to get away she dove under a piece of furniture and curled up in a tight ball, hoping she would be invisible. She closed her eyes tightly and wished she was back home. Then, she felt a soft pressure on her forehead and opened her eyes to see the kit-twoleg reaching under and offering a small piece of fish skin. The stinky smell of the fish caught Briarsong's attention and focused her mind out of its panic. She sniffed the skin and licked the tip, wondering what the kit-twoleg had planned. When she didn't take it at first the fish skin was waved around gently, accompanied by clicking sounds and the familiar world "Pearl" being called. Briarsong reached for the fish again but it was pulled back ever so slightly. Annoyed, she took a step forward and reached for it again, but yet again the skin as pulled just out of reach. Then, she as suddenly out from her hiding place and given the fish skin treat. She chewed it and relished the texture and taste, not even noticing the small claw stroking her back and neck.

Briarsong was doing her second patrol of the day around the twoleg cave when she heard the portal to the outside world creek open. Casually, she padded over and watched as the she-twoleg came in with many things hanging from her claws. She put them down right inside and left the portal open as she went back out to presumably grab more. Briarsong waited a moment, then hesitantly made her way to the opening. Immediately she as hit with a cold breeze that brought of smells of sheep, goat, Brody, hay, and farm. These new scents had become familiar and were no longer scary and strange. Without even realizing it, she had placed one paw just over the wood cave floor and felt dirt beneath her paw for the first time in moons. The ground was hard and cold as leaf-bare was on its way. She let her claws scrape at the earth and the comforting feeling brought a deep feeling of homesickness for the outside world.

"Briarsong?" she heard the familiar voice of Sully and looked up to see his wide blue eyes. He had been casually walking around when he noticed her. A big smile blossomed across his face and he took a eager step towards her. The rush of excitement at the thought of walking through the portal and back to the outside sent a termer through Briarsong and without even realizing it, she took another step forward.

"Pearl," came a sharp hiss from the she-twoleg. Briarsong was surprised when a heavy foot came towards here and pushed her back inside the cave. She peaked over the foot as she was slowly backing up back inside, and saw Sully watching her.

"Come on!" Sully called. She knew if she tried she could just hop over or go around the large twoleg stump of a foot, but did she want to go back outside into the cold? Sully continued to call to her to encourage her to join him in the barn, but Briarsong had hesitated too long and the portal closed, leaving her sitting alone.

Chapter 3

[image]

"Pearl?" the soft voice of the kit-twoleg was quizzical and maybe even worried sounding. Briarsong sat and looked at her little pink bowl of her evening meal but couldn't stomach it. Looking up into her eyes, Briarsong wished she could tell the kit-twoleg she was sorry, and she appreciated her kindness. The kit-twoleg knelt down and tried to offer Briarsong the bowl of food again. When Briarsong refused she saw her smile disappear and Briarsong felt bad for making the kit-twoleg unhappy. Slowly, Briarsong left and returned to her usual room with the big roaring fire where the parent twolegs sat.

She watched the flames lick at the logs and got lost in the memorizing colors and flickering. Where did she belong? Did she belong here with the twolegs who had been nothing but kind to her? Did she belong in the Barn with the other cats, or was she still a Medicine Cat? Where was Starclan? Why hadn't they sent for her yet? Maybe the clans were all dead? Maybe Starclan had given up on her or saw she was living like a kittypet? Why had Starclan allowed her to let Cinderstar fall and then watched as she was exiled from her own clan and forest? The thoughts were rushing through her mind like the Seeing Stream and right as she was about to get lost in her memories a feather landed in front of her and tickled her paws.

"Pearl," cooed the little kit-twoleg. She flicked a stick around and the feather twisted and jumped. Briarsong felt a biological excitement rush through her veins as she watched the feather dance. Almost without making up her mind to do it, Briarsong pounced on the feather and was overjoyed to see it bounce away and wait for her a little further off. H*ow is she controlling that feather*? She thought to herself as she launched forward and reached out eagerly to grab the toy. Again the silly feather bounced away and mocked her just a few tail lengths away. The twolegs were all making deep grumbling sounds but when Briarsong checked on

them they seemed to be enjoying the feather as much as she was. Briarsong jumped, spun, and danced just behind the feather as she raced after it feeling an excitement she hadn't felt since arriving at the twolegs. The movements felt familiar and even though she wasn't stalking real prey and it was just a silly kits game, it made her think of being a kit in the nursery with her sister Fernkit and her brother Sunkit. A warm sensation of love and remembrance washed over her as she chased the feather and the twolegs made their deep sounds and the cold night passed on by.

Her late night patrol was lonely around the twoleg home. The shadows were long and ominous, the wind made the cave itself creek, and the fire had been put out, leaving the air crisp. Briarsong longed for companionship and missed her nightly meetups with Brody and Sully. Now that it was too cold to keep the windows open, she couldn't speak to them anymore and was completely alone. Sadness washed over her and she started to visit each window, hoping to see either Brody or Sully waiting for her. With each empty view of the outside world her heart sank more and more until she faced the last opportunity to see her friends. Should she look? What it nobody was there and she was truly alone?

Hesitantly she climbed up and looked outside. The moon was a full circle and shining brightly down on the farm brining everything to life with moonlight. And there, looking up at her was the long haired, blue eyed tom. He saw her and smiled, raising a paw in greeting. Behind him she saw Mango running after a mouse and disappearing into the barn. Brody emerged from his flock and melted away from the white sheep and joined Sully. He let out small woof of hello. His big tail started to wag and hit Sully over and over again in the head. The tom swiped at the tail but Brody didn't seem to notice one bit and woofed again at Briarsong. She could picture Sully explaining to Brody that she couldn't hear him and that he needed to put his tail away before it hurt a cat.

From the barn one of the cats she didn't know very well, appeared to see what all the woofing was about. They padded out, light on their paws, thin and tall with a muscular form like Mountainclan cats. The cat was an orange tabby with a few white spots that shone brightly in the moonlight. From so far away Briarsong wasn't sure if

it was a tom or she-cat but the cat joined Sully and Brody and the three started to talk. Feeling left out, Briarsong sat and watched as the three made conversation about something. A small bitter feeling she wasn't familiar with burned in her stomach. She sat with it a few moments before realizing it was envy. How dare Brody and Sully talk to this other cat? They knew she was all alone inside and looked forward to seeing them. The orange cat looked up at her and she couldn't tell for sure, but thought she saw pity in its green eyes.

Sully looked back up at Briarsong but she knew he couldn't sit there and watch her forever. She nodded in understanding and gently placed one paw up against the cold glass as if she could reach through and touch him. Briarsong didn't have the heart to watch him and Brody walk away so she jumped away first, and wondered once again who she was and where she belonged.

Chapter 4

[image]

Briarsong sat stunned as she watched the twolegs huff and puff as they dragged a tree into the home. After they had gotten it where they wanted it they all got together and strung different colored floating lights and balls onto it. Briarsong had never heard or seen such a ridiculous thing in her entire life. Why would the twolegs bring a tree that belongs outside, inside? It was beyond her and she knew nobody in Moonclan would believe her if she told them this story. The thought of Moonclan triggered a deep sadness inside and she longed to feel Ivypaw curled up by her in the Medicine Cat Den, or to see Voletail and Appleblaze running around camp with the energy of young kits. She had spent her entire life dedicated to her clan, her leaders, and Starclan that without them, she felt empty. Even though she enjoyed the treats, the food, the pets and the warmth from the twolegs, she also missed her family, the forest, and the herbs she had dedicated her life to learning. The tree brought with it the familiar smell of pine and Treeclan. Briarsong curled up at its base and could feel the aliveness of the tree and wished she was home.

The cold went on for many moons. From inside the twoleg cave with her pine tree, Briarsong watched as snow and ice covered the farm. Sully didn't come by as often but she could sometimes make out his pawprint in the snow, letting her know he had been by. Occasionally she even saw a mouse laid out on the perfectly white world, a love note from Sully. Those gestures of generosity made her smile. With each passing day that the world was dark and cold her heart grew sadder and sadder. Briarsong found comfort in her patrols and playing with the kit-twolegs feather, but her paws were itching to run, jump and climb. She wanted to feel the dirt between her paw pads and sun warming her fur. Yes she would sometimes be cold, or wet or maybe even hungry, but she would be those things and feel alive.

One day the pine tree was taken away, and the floating lights and

shinny balls disappeared into a box and all that was left was the cold.

Briarsong sat by the portal to the outside world and for the first time since her say, clawed at the wood. When the portal didn't open she tried again and again until she was so frustrated she threw herself at it. The kit-twoleg came by and tried to move her away from the portal or distract her with the feather, but Briarsong would just go back and wait for the opportunity to run. Whenever the twolegs needed to come or go they would lock her up as they realized she was trying to escape. The more she tried to run the more she was kept far away from her way out. A hostage within the place she had called home, Briarsong screamed out to Starclan for help or just a message. When she heard nothing in return she cried and and called out into the emptiness, "Starclan why have you abandoned me? I did everything you asked of me!" but they never responded.

Then one day as she was patrolling she watched as the twoleg went around opening all the windows. The air that blew in was stilly chilly but there was a hint of warmth to it. Briarsong flung herself into the open space and breathed in deep breaths as if she had been holding it all leaf-bare.

"Pearl," Brody's woof came from below and her heart soured with excitement.

"Hello Brody," she called down.

"Happy to see you again," he gave her a slobbery smile.

"You don't even know how happy I am to see you," she called back.

"Briarsong," Sully's voice called as he came running from the barn and joined Brody. "Glad to see you are okay."

Briarsong was about to reply but she felt the heavy twoleg paw on her back and swung her head around to see the she-twoleg looking at her. For a moment Briarsong panicked and thought the twoleg was going to cut her off again but instead the twoleg made a cooing sound and a tsk tsk that usually mean something nice. Briarsong

looked back at Brody and Sully nad called,

"Wait for me." before turning and following the she-twoleg as she guided her through the cave. The moment Briarsong realized the she-twoleg was going towards the portal she raced ahead and met her at the portal, meowing and crying. The twoleg bent down, stroked her back lovingly, and gave her a kiss on her head. Standing back up she opened the door and gestured for Briarsong. Not hesitating she leapt out of the twoleg cave and met the surprised faces of Brody and Sully. She wasn't a kittypet, but maybe she was a barn cat.

Chapter 5

[image]

Briarsong was free. She wasn't a kittypet anymore and she was glad of it.

"They just let you leave?" Sully asked excitedly as he raced to meet her.

"Yes," Briarsong purred as she body slammed into Sully and sent them both tumbling like silly apprentice play fighting. She was so excited she couldn't contain herself and she jumped back and saw for the first time how big Brody really was. He looked down at her through his white fur and let out a small oof of joy to see her in person. She reached out, placing both per front paws on his long muzzle and licked his face before rubbing her whole head against his and purring loudly. To her surprise a big wet tongue gave her entire belly and face a lick and Sully laughed as she sprung back. Brody wagged his tail but was quick to rejoin his flock and keep them safe.

"I can't believe it," Sully laughed. "I've been hoping you would be out here but I didn't know if it would ever happen."

"I can't be a kittypet anymore," she grimaced. "They were very kind to me but I felt so alone."

"You aren't alone anymore," he whispered shyly. Briarsong took a tentative step back and tried to change the topic.

"Can you show me around? I've been dreaming of what this place looks like from outside, but I can finally explore it."

"Oh yes," Sully didn't seem discouraged by her quick change of topic and he gestured with his large fluffy tail towards the barn. "Lets start where you will be staying."

As Briarsong stepped into the barn for the first time she was in awe

at the large piles of dried grass that reached high into the sky.

"What is this?" she asked.

"This is where twolegs keep the hay for the goats and sheep. Its just dried grass from the fields. Smells good doesn't it?"

"It does," Briarsong agreed.

"We all usually sleep close by each other," Sully guided her around the base of the large pile of hay and towards the back. "Like Brody we have a job here. We hunt the mice and rats that might come into the barn. If there aren't many than the twolegs will leave us bowls of food and water." he padded around the corner and a natural cave appeared within the bales and she could see where cats had nested.

"How many of you are in here?" she asked, sniffing the air to try and pick out the different cat scents.

"There is me and Mango, then there is an orange tom named Morris, a black she-cat named Cookie and a grey tom named Moose. Cookie has been here the longest and is pretty old, while Moose is the newest and the youngest. Mango and I came at the same time when we were young kits so we were here with Cookie before Morris and Moose showed up. We all get along pretty well I would say."

"Those are all unusual names," she mused, poking at the sharp hay and wondering if it was comfortable to sleep on.

"They aren't to us. They are the names the twoleg gave us and so we just kept them since we all came her either very young or without names we could remember."

"Briarsong is a stupid name," came the hiss from Mango. "What are you doing outside the twoleg cave?"

"She's one of us now," Sully announced excitedly. "Isn't that great Mango? You won't be the only young she-cat anymore. I bet you will like that,"

Mango gave Briarsong a dirty look and flattened her ears against her head. "I didn't ask for another she-cat," she spat. Cookie and I

like being the only two. "

"I'm sorry," Briarsong offered. "I'm not here to cause any trouble. I was hoping we could all be friends,"

"Friends? With a forest cat? You are vicious creatures with no thought for anyone but yourselves. We don't need your kind here in the barn. Go back to your forest where you belong."

"She belongs here," Sully said sternly. He took a step forward and met Mango's vicious stare. "Go somewhere else with your hatred."

"I haven't done anything to you," Briarsong insisted. "You can't possibly hate me for no reason." it was her last statement that must have sent Mango into a blind fury because the tabby and white she-cat lunged for Briarsong with her claws extended. Sully was so surprised he jumped to the side and let Mango go flying past him. Briarsong noticed that the she-cat knew nothing about fighting because she left her flank exposed and taking advantage, Briarsong gave her a small scratch. This infuriated Mango further and she spun around and lunged again for Briarsong. This time Briarsong took a step to the side and gave the she-cat another small slash on her shoulder as she went flying by. Briarsong laughed to herself because even the apprentices in Moonclan could fight better than this she-cat. This silly Mango was fighting blindly through range and not thinking about what her body was doing specifically.

"I you are trying to attack an opponent," Briarsong said, "You can't just blindly jump around or they will just cut you up like I have. You need to think about each movement and watch your opponent to anticipate their next move."

Mango stood staring at her and breathing heavily. Clearly the cat had little to no fighting experience and was out of shape from her relaxed barn life. Briarsong and Mango just blinked at each other for a few more moments before Briarsong padded over to the stiff she-cat and gently moved her paws to a more stable position to support her weight evenly.

"Oh," Mango let out a breath and her hackles rested.

"Now your paws are supporting your back end and your front end so you can't be so easily pushed off your paws." Briarsong gave her a gentle shove to prove to the she-cat she felt more stable.

"That makes sense," Mango nodded in agreement. "So if I wanted to go after someone I wouldn't just jump at them?"

Briarsong gave a small chuckle. "Not exactly. Always assume your opponent is more skilled than you, that way you are prepared for anything."

"How do you know all this?" Mango asked curiously. "Did Starclan teach you?"

"No. I learned the basics of fighting when I was an apprentice. Then I decided I didn't want to be a Warrior and instead wanted to be a Medicine Cat. So my fighting knowledge is actually pretty limited."

"Warrior? Medicine Cat?" Mango gave Sully a sideways look and he shook his head, just as confused.

"The cats who live in the forest," Briarsong tried to explain. "We live in four - three - clans and we have different positions within that clan so everything runs smoothly and we can feed everyone and protect our borders against other clans."

"Sounds exciting," Sully mused.

"Sounds hard," Mango shot back. "Why would you want to struggle in the forest for food and territory? There are mice, clean water, warm beds, and Brody to protect us here."

"Well," Briarsong shrugged. "It is just how I was raised. You are taught to love and support your clan like its one big family. We all look after one another, support one another, and its the most amazing feeling to be a part of something bigger than yourself."

"Than why did you leave, if you liked it so much?" Mango asked and Briarsong winced.

"What position did you have?" Sully asked, changing the topic so Briarsong wouldn't have to answer Mango's question.

"I was a Medicine Cat. My duties included learning about the herbs in our territory that can be used for healing our clanmates. It takes a lot of training to be able to tell them all apart, know how to mix them together, and to know what symptoms get which remedy. I also had a connection with Starclan and could get visions of the future."

Mango laughed out loud and almost couldn't catch her breath.

"Stop being rude Mango," Sully hissed.

"Visions of the future?" Mango managed to say though her laughing fit. "Wait until Cookie hears about that. She will think that is the funniest thing. Did you see *this* coming?" Mango made a funny face and laughed again.

"Enough," Sully hissed growled at Mango, stepping in front of Briarsong and gently leading her away from the still laughing Mango. "Ignore her," he whispered.

"No, I can see how she would think it is silly since she didn't grow up with Starclan." Briarsong tired to explain away the she-cats surprising behavior but was hiding her hurt feelings.

"It's just different. And we don't get a lot of different here," Sully tried to explain sweetly. "Don't worry about her, I have so much more to show you."

Chapter 6

[image]

Briarsong let Sully show her around the farm he had called home since he was a kit. After leaving the Hay Barn he across the muddy stinky ground of the holding pens where the goats and sheep slept at night. Briarsong tried to not get her paws dirty but it was impossible, and she loathed the thought of her paws smelling like goat. After they crossed the stinky holding pens Sully brought her to another barn but this one was full of different twoleg items Briarsong had no names for.

"This is called Owl Barn because there is large owl that lives in there. We avoid it, and it avoids us." He gestured for Briarsong to keep moving and he showed her a few more smaller structures that didn't have names but we filled with more twoleg stuff. He brought her back to the Hay Barn and showed her the gate that led into the fields where the goats and sheep graze. Looking off into the meadow with its tall grasses, Briarsong was reminded of home. She hadn't said anything the entire tour of the farm but now Briarsong looked over at Sully and met his bright eyes with her sad ones.

"I miss home," she whispered. "I don't know who I am anymore."

Sully stepped over and rested his head under her chin and purred. "You are here now. You can live with all of us in the Hay Barn. Mango will come around and the others will love you once they meet you tonight."

"I don't know," Briarsong pulled away and felt Sully flinch at her coldness. "I'm not like you. I grew up in a clan, with a purpose, with a future of protecting my clan. I lived by a very strict set of codes that I have upheld my entire life."

"But you left," Sully said hesitantly, asking more as a question than

a statement.

"I'm a Medicine Cat, not a barn cat," Briarsong snapped at him, feeling the loneliness boiling in her belly.

"Can you be a Medicine Cat here?"

Briarsong paused for a moment and then shook her head. "You don't need a Medicine Cat. You have the twolegs who take care of you. There are no fights or death here. Everything I trained for means nothing."

"I think you gave Mango a good fight," Sully offered, and Briarsong couldn't help but appreciate the kindness he had shown her.

"She'll be fine,"

"Give it a chance?" Sully finally asked after a quiet few moments. His eyes were pleading but his voice was controlled and low. "I think you might like it if you try."

Briarsong padded up to the gate leading to the field and jumped up onto the stone barrier. The twoleg joined her and called out to Brody to bring the flock home just like Briarsong had seen him do many times from within the twoleg home. The twoleg looked over and gave Briarsong a stroke along her spine, and she gave him a little purr of gratitude. The two waited together and watched as the sheep and goats slowly made their way over from the outskirts of the field.

"Pearl," Brody woofed as he lumbered through the gate with his flock. He reached up and touched his nose to Briarsong and then padded off with his usual tail wag. Briarsong and the twoleg waited together until the last of the flock was in and then he let out a deep breath, ruffled Briarsong's fur and then followed Brody off. Briarsong waited a few more moments and looked out past the field and to the trees lining the far off distance. They looked like little blades of grass so far away and she felt like she could reach out and touch them. She sat there until the sun filled the sky with New-Leaf colors and only jumped down once the stars were bright in the sky. To her surprise she found Sully waiting for her by the Hay Barn

entrance as she padded over from the field.

"Ready for your first night in the Barn?" Sully asked with a smile. "You can finally meet everyone. They should be in,"

Briarsong was surprised by how nervous she felt to meet the rest of the Barn cats. Would they accept her or hate her? She followed Sully back behind the hay and to the sleeping area the cats had created in the warmth of the hay. Mango was sharing tongues with the the orange tom Morris, the younger and smaller tom Moose was eating a mouse while the tall and slender black cat with the top of one of her ears gone, Cookie watched them with beady eyes.

"This is Briarsong," Sully introduced her and the other cats looked up, some with a more welcoming gaze than others.

"Hello," Briarsong said softly, not sure how she felt.

"Out of the House?" Moose laughed. "Well welcome! Happy to have you here."

"You can't sleep over here," Mango snapped, indicating the nesting area she had made for her and Morris. "So find your own place and don't expect any of us to help you make one."

"Briarsong," Cookie mused. "That is an interesting name. Where did you get it from?"

"I'm from the forest," Briarsong explained, meeting Cookie's steady gaze. She might be old but she was fierce and independent. Even if the Barn cats didn't have a clan, Cookie was their leader.

"Yes. I thought so." Cookie nodded. "It has been a very long time since I met a forest cat."

"You've had forest cats here before?" Briarsong was surprised.

"Not here at the barn." Cookie rolled her eyes. "I've had a very full life before ending up here. I've met some of you forest cats many many moons ago when I was no older than Moose. I think it was Meadowclan whose clan I had accidently wandered into. Very interesting way of life you all live over there."

"Not any more interesting than living in a Barn is to me," Briarsong shot back and she saw Cookie's mouth flicker with a smile.

"I thought you clan cats were loyal to your clan? Why are you all the way out here?"

"She doesn't have to answer that," Sully spoke up. "This is her first night outside of the twoleg House. Let's talk tomorrow,"

"We will definitely talk." Cookie gave Briarsong a glace before heading over to her sleeping spot and curling up in the hay with a flick of her tail. Briarsong watched the older black she-cat and wasn't afraid or intimated by her. Despite her tough attitude Briarsong liked her and wanted to hear more about her adventures before the Barn.

"I made you a nest for tonight," Sully gestured a little ways away where hay was matted down and moss and grass was woven in. Hesitantly, Briarsong padded up to the nest, sniffed it and then sat down and was surprised by how comfortable it was.

"Thank you," she smiled warmly at him. He met her smile with a huge grin and purred loudly.

"I'll be right over here," he pointed with his tail to another nest that was closer to where Moose was settled, already snoring. Without another word, Sully made his way over to his nest and settled in for the night. Briarsong appreciated that he hadn't pushed her to share a nest next to him. She had spent so many moons sleeping alone in her den before Ivypaw, and sleeping next to Ivypaw verses Sully would have been very different. Curling up and placing her tail over her eyes, Briarsong hoped once again to dream of Starclan.

Chapter 7

[image]

Briarsong yawned an stretched out her front legs, feeling the hay sticking to her pelt as she started to move around. She looked around to see Morris and Mango curled up together asleep, and the slow rise and fall of Sully and Moose's sides, but Cookie was gone. Quietly, Briarsong left her nest and headed towards the front of the barn where the sun was just staring to rise outside. She saw Cookie sitting alone watching the twoleg, and Brody get the sheep and goats moved back out into the field. Cookie's ear twitched and Briarsong knew she heard her approaching even when she didn't look. She sat next to the back she-cat and they both watched as Brody moved with his flock from the holding pens back out to freedom. The twoleg waved at the two cats as he passed but didn't stop moving as he herded the flock.

"Is your clan going to come looking for you?" Cookie asked harshly, not even looking at Briarsong. "Because we don't need that kind of trouble here."

"I don't think so," Briarsong answered sadly. "I think they have all but forgotten about me."

"Probably for the better," Cookie looked over, her face a little softer than her voice. "We don't need a bunch of forest can storming through the Barn and starting something."

"They wouldn't just come in and kill everyone," Briarsong felt defensive. "That is not what clan cats do,"

Cookie scoffed in disbelief. "Clan cats are some of the most self centered, battle hungry cats I've ever met. I was only with Meadowclan a short time but it was enough time to see what you all were about."

"Each clan is different," Briarsong tried to explain, pushing down

the anger that was rising. "Each leader and each cat is different. I was the Moonclan Medicine Cat and I can guarantee my clanmates would not storm the Farm and try to hurt any of you for no reason."

"A medicine cat?" Cookie looked surprised. "What is a medicine cat doing so far away from her clan? I know the training you go through and the vows you take for that position. I talked with the Meadowclan medicine cat when he helped me with a bite I had. I know how important you are to your clan."

"They don't want me anymore."

"Don't *want* you." Cookie narrowed her eyes suspiciously, "What did you do to get pushed out from your clan? We don't need trouble here so if you are going to bring trouble then you are not welcome."

"I allowed our leader to fall down a rock wall to her death," Briarsong said the words for the first time out loud since it had happened and felt a shiver run through her spine as the cold reality took her in its cold grasp.

"Uh-huh..." Cookie said slowly. "Don't leaders have like 9 lives or something?"

"She only had 3 left and lost them as she hit rocks on the way down." Briarsong whispered, feeling her paws tremble with the memory. "I didn't want to," she added, her eyes getting blurry with tears. "Starclan made me do it."

"Starclan? Oh that's right." Cookie nodded, remembering. "Dead cats *made* you drop your leader to her death?" she challenged.

"Just because you don't understand our ways doesn't make them mouse-brained," Briarsong snapped. "Starclan couldn't allow her to destroy Moonclan with her vendetta against Mountainclan. She would have destroyed both clans before she was satisfied."

"Then why did your clan send you away if it sounds like you did the right thing?"

Briarsong shuffled her paws in the dirt before answering. "It's more

complicated than that. All they saw was me let Cinderstar fall, they wouldn't understand the reason. Starclan doesn't speak to all the clan."

"This Starclan you dedicated your life too doesn't seem like they care about you," Cookie offered. Briarsong would normally have interjected and defended Starclan but what Cookie said made sense. There had been no word from Starclan since she left the forest and the silence made her feel abandoned.

"Yeah..." Briarsong agreed hesitantly. "it does feel that way." Cookie licked her paw and rubbed her face with it a few times before letting out a long sigh an arching her back in a stretch.

"Are you going to continue to uphold your vows as a medicine cat?" she said casually, a glint of mischief in her eyes.

"What do you mean?" Briarsong asked, not understanding what Cookie was trying to get at.

"Sully," Cookie said exasperated. "Are you going to be his mate or are you going to continue to pretend to be a medicine cat and stay single because dead cats told you too?"

"Its not that easy," Briarsong stood up and was done talking to Cookie.

"You aren't a medicine cat anymore, Starclan has abandoned you. Do what you want with your life," Cookie called after her as Briarsong made her way away from the Barn and through the gate and into the field to find Brody.

Briarsong made her way through the grass trying to clear her head. The sun was high in the sky and it warmed her back and reminded her of her apprentice days with her mentor Cloverclaw as they would search for herbs in the sunny spots. The gentle breeze brought the strong scent of wild flowers and sheep. Briarsong had to go quite a ways before she could hear the sheep and goats munching away on grass. The barn was a red blob in the distance behind her but she felt the urge to keep moving. Little birds swooped from the skies or flew startled out of the grass. She wasn't

interested in hunting, but just wanted to feel far away from twolegs and their strange belongings. Then she was stepping among the goats and sheep who took little to no notice of her sudden appearance. One of the goats even gave her a little nudge with its nose when she walked through its clover patch. From among the dense wool the slobbery face of Brody appeared with his hanging jowls and floppy ears. He saw her and his large tail swung back and forth.

"Pearl," he called. "How are you today?"

"Hello Brody," she licked the large white dog on his muzzle and he nudged her back gently. "I just wanted to get away."

"I like being away," Brody agreed. "I like the tall grass, the trees and the open air."

Briarsong nodded in agreement as she looked around. "So you just stand here all day?"

"I protect the flock from any dangers," Brody explained.

"Are there many dangers?" Briarsong asked, a little shocked and concerned.

"Not with me around," Brody held his head high.

"Can I stay here with you for a little while?"

Chapter 8

[image]

The days got longer and hotter and the barn cats found themselves lounging around more and more. It was even too hot for the mice so there wasn't much hunting in the Hay Barn. There was always plenty of water available and food provided by the twolegs so the cats found themselves being lazy. The buzzing of saccades filled the air with their hum and the flies were almost too much to bare as they bit at the cats ears and eyelids. The heat caused the usual smell of goat and sheep to become suffocating and Briarsong found herself almost choking on the scent. It was one of these hot days that Briarsong found herself wandering back out into the field to find Brody just to get away from the hot sticky smells of the farm.

"Hey," Sully called as Briarsong was sneaking away. She stopped and winced before putting on a smile and turning around to greet Sully as he ran up behind her.

"Oh hello,"

"Want some company?"

"Umm," Briarsong hesitated, she wanted some alone time but it was hard to say no to Sully's big grin and shining eyes. He was dirty from rolling around in the dirty to cool off his his pelt was a drooping mess. "Okay."

"Great! Where are we off too?"

"I'm heading out to the woods on the edges of the field." Briarsong announced, surprised by her own response.

"Okay then, sounds good. We might even run into Cookie. She's always out there wandering around."

"Great," Briarsong mumbled under her breath. She led the way

under the gate and into the field. Sully kept pace with his always eager and friendly chatter about little things. Briarsong pretended to listen but found the heat was making her incredibly moody and irritable. She didn't remember ever being so hot when she lived in Moonclan and wished she was back in her Medicine Cat den where it was always cool and comfortable.

The two cats padded through the grass and wild flowers in silence as the heat from the sun bore down on them. They came to the stone wall that lined part of the field and it was cracking and crumbling in places. Briarsong was looking for a good spot to jump up when she tripped over a root sticking up out of the ground and felt herself start to go tumbling forward when Sully grabbed her and yanked her backwards. The two stood panting for a moment as Briarsong tried to steady her nerves.

"Thank you," she gasped, feeling her heart pounding in her chest.

"Are you okay?" Sully asked, looking her over for any possible injury.

"I'm fine. Didn't even hit the ground thanks to you."

"Did I grab you too hard, I didn't meant to hurt you."

Briarsongs bad mood was broken and she laughed, "You worry too much. I'm fine, I promise."

Sully let out a big sigh of relief. "I would be a terrible Warrior, wouldn't I?" he chuckled, realizing how silly he was to have overreacted to her nonexistent injury.

"You would be a kind hearted Warrior," Briarsong corrected him. "Not every Warrior has to be fierce and battle crazy. Some of the best Warriors we had were gentle souls who were loyal and loving."

"What would my Warrior name be?" Sully asked. Briarsong leapt onto the stone wall and down the other side. She waited for Sully to join her before replying,

"Leaders choose a Warriors full name. I would have no idea,"

"Just for fun," Sully gave her a playful nudge then leapt back his tail high and twitching with a apprentice like playfulness. Briarsong stood still for a moment, not sure how to respond to his playfulness. Sully leaned forward and shoved her shoulder with his muzzle before leaping back crouching down in a hunting position.

"Don't you dare," She warned, watching as his big fluffy tail swept the ground like a cat on the hunt. She laughed and took a few paw steps backwards but his eyes followed her and she saw his haunches start to wiggle.

"I was thinking I could be Mistleaf, or Raintail,"

"Or Dungmuzzle," Briarsong shot back jokingly, watching as Sully slowly raised his back end and put all his weight into his haunches. She let out a squeal as Sully leapt forward and took chase. The two ran into the woods and through the trees, twisting, turning and laughing. Sometimes Briarsong let Sully get close to catching her but then she would bound right out of his reach. She didn't know how long they had been running but the sweet smell of water wafted on a small breeze and she and Sully ran side by side until they came upon the quiet stream. Briarsong crouched down and immediately started to drink, feeling the cool water go down her throat and coat the inside of her belly. The two drank in silence as they caught their breath and drank until they were too full to move. Just as Briarsong was leaning back she felt a splash of water hit her face and looked over to see Sully pretending to look the other direction. With one paw she splashed the long haired tom back. Sully made her feel playful and like an apprentice again. He never had any expectations for her and never asked for anything from her. It was so easy to be around him and be herself that she even forgot about Moonclan.

The wet face of Sully looked at her with a cheeky grin and plopped down onto the ground with a big yawn. He started to groom himself and Briarsong found herself stepping closer to him before sitting down and helping him fix his long pelt and get it back in order. She had never shared tongues with anyone besides Cinderstar and Sunheart and the feeling although uncomfortable at first, felt so natural. Sully would be the perfect mate for any she-cat, but could she go against the Warrior Code and her Medicine Cat duties to be

with him? It was still possible that Starclan would send for her like they promised, and what if they found her fat with kits and sleeping in the Hay Barn? How could she help her clan like she had always sworn to do if she had a mate and kits by her side?

"Why don't you want to be my mate?" Sully's voice cut through her thoughts and Briarsong met his beautiful but serious eyes. "I think we are perfect for each other; I'm silly and fun and you are serious and smart. We balance each other out really well."

"I - I can't," Briarsong stuttered. "I am a Medicine Cat,"

"Not anymore you aren't," Sully said softly, nudging her chin lovingly. "We can be so happy here together on the Farm. Its not a clan but that doesn't mean we can't be a family."

Briarsong let the words sink and and thought hard about what he had said. Sully didn't push for an immediate reply but just lay next to her and waited patiently grooming her shoulder and side.

"I want to..." she finally said, the blood rushing in her ears and making her face feel hot. "But I don't know if I can yet."

Sully nodded, "Okay then. You will let me know when you change your mind?"

"I just need to know for sure whether or not Starclan has abandoned me," she tried to explain. "I just want to know whether I'm relieved from my Medicine Cat duties,"

"Why are you waiting for dead cats who haven't spoken to you since before you arrived here?" Sully challenged. "Make up your own mind for once. Its your life, not theirs." He wasn't being cruel or mean about it, but Briarsong couldn't explain to a non-clan cat what it was like to have visions and dreams of your ancestors and the connection to them.

Chapter 9

[image]

Briarsong and Sully padded along the bank of the stream together, exploring and hunting when they got hungry. They were in no rush so enjoyed the sounds of of birds and rustling leaves as they made their way up stream. At one point they stopped and took a nap together in the shade. By the time they made their way back to the Barn it was dark out and the moon was high in the sky. They slipped into the Hay Barn where the other cats lay asleep. Sully climbed into his usual spot and hunkered down. Briarsong watched him and wanted to curl up next to him but was afraid. She stood a few moments longer, watching as his breathing slowed before she went back to her nest and fell asleep.

The sounds of the goats and sheep woke Briarsong from her deep sleep and she blinked the dried gunk from her eyes. She looked over and saw that Sully was still fast asleep with all four of his paws in the air and a small bit of drool hanging from the side of his mouth. Hungry, she got up, shook off the hay and padded to the front of the barn where the twolegs usually left them a bowl of kibble for breakfast.

"Hello Cookie," she greeted the black she-cat who was sitting by the barn entrance and looking out. Briarsong hunched down by the bowl and ate some of the dry hard kibble. It wasn't as delicious as what they used to feed her inside the twoleg cave, but it was nice to have a little energy before hunting for herself.

"Did you see Moose when you came in last night?" Cookie asked her. Briarsong finished chewing her mouthful and thought back.

"I don't know. We came in pretty late and I wasn't really paying attention."

"His nest smelt cold this morning."

"He probably found somewhere else to sleep. He's done that before," Briarsong shrugged, taking another bite and chewing the stone like little brown circles. Cookie only huffed in reply but remained vigil, waiting for little Moose to return home. The true worry from Cookie wasn't lost on Briarsong, and she sat next to the elderly she-cat and looked out onto the farm.

"Its going to be hot out again," Cookie sounded worried. "All the water puddles around the Farm have dried up."

"The sheep and goats have water he can get too." Briarsong tried to reassure her.

"But if he went to far off..." Cookie shook her head.

"What are we looking at?" the sassy voice of Mango came up from behind. She stood next to Briarsong and squinted out the big entrance. "I don't see anything,"

"Moose didn't come home last night," Cookie announced. Mango let out an annoyed huff and went over to the kibble bowl and put her paw on the edge, rocking it back and forth so the tinkling of the kibble rolling around was heard.

"Moose!" she called. "Time to eat!" They all waited but not little grey tom came bounding up to gobble down all the kibble.

"Get Sully and Morris," Cookie ordered. Without arguing, Mango left to go wake the other toms. A few moments later the yawning Sully and Morris came around the corner with Mango leading them.

"This better be an emergency," Morris huffed. "I was having an amazing dream about hunting one of those sheep."

"Moose didn't come home last night and hasn't returned this morning," Cookie had no sympathy for the sleepy toms and got straight to the point. "I want you three to go looking for him and Briarsong and I wait here incase he comes back. Check back in at sun high and sun down."

Mango rolled her eyes but obeyed, Morris nodded in agreement and Sully also agreed without any hesitation. Before heading off Sully gave Briarsong a quick lick on the cheek.

"You would have been an amazing clan leader," Briarsong said looking over at Cookie as she watched the three go off in different directions.

"Looks like we might need a medicine cat after all. I feel it in my heart that something happened to him."

"Do you have anything for injuries?" Briarsong asked but she already knew the answer. Cookie was calm on the outside, but there were subtle twitches and glances that gave her away. "I'll go see what I can find then."

"Hurry," Cookie whispered.

Briarsong took off back towards the woods where she and Sully had been the day before. She tried to keep up a steady pace but was still exhausted from so much running and climbing that she had to slow down. The stone wall loomed above her and she jumped it and started her search for the most basic of herbs. She looked high and low but only was able to find some borage leaves, burnet, and chervil. Gathering as much as she could, she took off back to the Barn. Once back she laid everything out on the ground to organize as Cookie stood guard, watching for the others to return. Briarsong was in her element and focused so didn't notice Cookie watching her closely.

"You're really good at that," Cookie finally said. "Watching you work is very interesting."

"I really loved it," Briarsong agreed, as she finished her pile and sat back, feeling accomplished. "I miss it every day."

"Do you think you would ever feel as happy here as you did in your clan? Because I can't have you leading poor Sully on if you don't have intentions to stay. He's a big goofball with a huge heart, but he is also very gullible."

Briarsong met Cookie's stern eyes. "I have no intentions of hurting Sully, or any of you here. You have been nothing but good to me."

"You might not *intend* to hurt him, but if you plan on running off to play Medicine Cat then you *will* hurt him. You need to make up your mind soon or it will tare you apart."

Briarsong didn't have time to argue when she heard the heavy paw steps of Morris coming back their way. She looked up and saw the sun was high in the sky and it was probably time for the recovery team to check back in. Morris came into view first with Mango and Sully only a short time behind him. As everyone gathered back together and took a rest from the heat, Cookie finally asked if anyone had seen anything. Sully and Mango only shook their heads but Morris was very quiet. Briarsong met the toms green gaze but he looked back at the ground quickly. Cookie had caught the glance and was having none of it,

"Out with it already Morris. We don't have all day to sit here and try and figure out what you are thinking."

"I found some blood," he whispered. "and I think it was from Moose. I also smelt those wild dogs not far off."

"Little adventurer always went out on his own. I warned him," Cookie said sadly.

"The young ones doesn't always last long. They don't like to listen when we warn them about the different dangers." Mango added matter-of-factly.

"Tonight we don't eat and sit vigil for Moose," Cookie announced. "As we do with any cat we lose here."

Briarsong was stunned by the sorrow the older she-cat showed towards Moose, and the grieving ritual the cats practiced to show respect for the lost life. Mango and Morris didn't hang around and went off to do their own thing while Cookie continued to sit and stare blankly.

"Come on," Sully whispered, "lets give her some space." Briarsong

followed the long haired tom out of the Hay Barn and down towards the field.

Chapter 10

[image]

Briarsong followed Sully quietly as he led the way to a shady spot where they could stay cool. The dirt underneath the large oak tree was a nice change from the suns rays and the two cats lay down.

"I never even knew him," Briarsong said sadly. "I feel so selfish. I've been living with you all in the barn for a while now and I never even took the time to get to know Moose."

"He was a good one. Although he liked to wander pretty far by himself. The little ones think they can do whatever they want and nothing bad will happen. He isn't the first and he won't be the last. I'm just lucky Cookie took Mango and I under her wing when we first came here, and she kept us straight."

"Why didn't she did that with Moose?"

"Oh she tried." Sully sighed. "But Cookie isn't as young as she used to be and he didn't like to listen so would take off. Cookie takes it as a personal failure whenever one of the younger ones doesn't make it. And sometimes they just wander off and we aren't sure if they wanted to live in the forest, go find another barn, or got eaten. Once a sheep kicked one in the head and the poor thing died instantly." Sully shook his head sadly.

"You've been here on the Farm your entire life?" Briarsong asked.

"Pretty much. I was taken from my mother and brought here pretty young. For a while they kept me locked up so I couldn't run off but once I got older they would let me out during the day, and then I wasn't locked up anymore. They did the same thing to Mango and Morris. Mango came around the same time as me so we've both grown up here. Morris was older when joined us and says he used to live at another Hay Barn but kept getting attacked by another tom living there, so his old twolegs brought him here. Cookie has been here the longest."

"Must have been hard for Cookie to live here alone for so long." Briarsong mused. "I can't imagine being all alone and then suddenly a bunch of kits show up."

"Cookie had her sister before Mango and I showed up. She doesn't like to talk about her but I do know she and her sister were super close before something happened to her."

"Did she get eaten?"

"I don't know exactly. Cookie never said what happened to Rosy. When we were kits she talked about Rosy a little but that stopped and we just kind of leave it alone."

"Do you miss your mother and littermates?"

"I don't really remember them." Sully shrugged. "Honestly I consider Cookie more of a mother figure and Mango more of a sister figure. I really love my little family here on the farm. I know its not for every cat, but I think its a nice life. We never go hungry, we never go thirsty, we have a warm place to sleep, and we have each other."

"I didn't really think of it like that." Briarsong admitted. "I kept thinking how because you all didn't live in a Clan you were missing out. I'm realizing that Clan life isn't the only way to be happy."

"That is good to hear," Sully purred, and Briarsong tired not to meet his eyes, afraid she would be drawn in by their warm glow. "What about you? Tell me a little about your clan."

Briarsong hesitated, afraid she would miss them too much. "Well," she started then stopped. "You already know I was a Medicine Cat, and what that meant."

"True. Did you have any family? Tell me about your friends and how you lived."

"I had two littermates," Briarsong started, realizing it was easier to talk about the simple stuff than to go right into the hard stuff. "A brother Sunheart and a sister Ferntail. Ferntail died of Green Cough and Sunheart died when a rock fell on him."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Sully rubbed her cheek with his muzzle. "Do you still have your mother and father?"

"My mother died as well, her name was Creektalon. When I left my clan my father was still alive although very old. His name is Runningtail."

"Do you miss them?"

"Sunheart and I were very close. We became apprentices at the same time, and he was also so supportive of me becoming a Medicine Cat. I wouldn't have had to courage to ask my mentor Cloverclaw if I could be his apprentice if Sunheart hadn't encouraged me. He was also such a great mentor to his apprentice Appleblaze, and would have been an amazing father."

"He had kits?"

"Yes. Four beautiful, healthy kits with his mate and our leader Cinderstar." Briarsong shivered and realized it was the first time she had said her leaders name since that awful day. "He was really excited to watch them grow up and to hopefully mentor one. He was so wonderful," she added trying to stay clear of Cinderstar's name.

"At least the kits have their mother to be there for them," Sully tired to reassure her. "I bet Cinderstar will honor her brother in the way she raises them."

Briarsong stiffened and dug her claws into the dirt, holding back the pain welling up inside her. Sully was shocked by her reaction and she could feel him trying to comfort her but she couldn't even hear his voice over the ringing in her ears.

"I killed her," she finally screamed. "I let her fall to her death."

"Who?"

"Cinderstar," Briarsong let all the pain and anger that she had been holding down since she woke up in the twoleg cave come bursting out of her like a thunderstorm. The outburst of emotion was frightening but Briarsong couldn't hold it bottled up any longer and

she cried and shook uncontrollably as her body finally allowed her to feel. Sully didn't say anything but lay himself gently on top of her to hold her still while she shook and cried. His long hair smelled of grass and Brody but it allowed Briarsong to focus on his scent and slow her breathing until she had stopped shaking. She lay whimpering like a little kit on the ground while Sully licked her neck and the top of her head until she finally was able to take a deep breath and let her stiff body go limp.

The two lay under the tree in the shade for what felt like moons. Briarsong was exhausted from her out burst and extremely embarrassed. She didn't even have the courage to look at Sully for fear he would think she was a pathetic little kit. When she finally looked up she saw him nestled up next to her and purring. The soft rumble of his purr was relaxing and she took another deep breath and felt calm.

"I loved her like a sister," Briarsong said, meeting Sully's kind eyes with her tired ones. He nodded but let her talk, not asking any questions. "Cinderstar, Sunheart and I all grew up together. Were were kits in the nursery together and even our moms were best friends. We were apprentices together, and we would even sneak out and go hunting together, even though hunting is not something Medicine Cats commonly do. I was so proud of her when she became deputy, and even more proud when she took her place as leader. I felt like a proud mother watching her kit succeed. She worked so hard to get to be leader and she was fair and just. Even when she was the only she-cat leader in the entire forest she was strong and proud and stood next to the toms as their equal." she took a pause to catch her breath then with a warm nuzzle from Sully she continued. "It was was Cinderstar, Dawncloud and myself leading Moonclan through the cold, sicknesses, hunger, and we were great. Starclan looked down on us and smiled because never before had three she-cats run a clan like we had. But then I started getting visions of trees falling down in the forest." she trembled. "I couldn't figure out how big trees like this oak here would fall," she and Sully both looked up at the large, sturdy tree they were resting under.

"I don't think this tree could fall," Sully agreed. "Its roots go deep

into the dirt."

"Exactly!" Briarsong exclaimed. "But Starclan wasn't telling me that *trees* would fall, they were telling me *Tree*clan would fall."

"Why wouldn't they just say it was Treeclan?" Sully asked earnestly.

Briarsong burst into laughter. "I don't know." She admitted. "It would have made a lot more sense if they just said it was Treeclan, wouldn't it?" for the first time Briarsong questioned Starclan and their messages.

"How does an entire clan of cats get destroyed?"

"There was a sick fox. I'd never seen anything like it before. It was wobbling around like a newborn kit, and it seemed confused and was foaming at the mouth. It was wandering around our territory. I found it and it ran off into Mountianclan territory, but then Mountainclan chased it into Treeclan territory. The fox had something Treeclan called The Madness. Whoever was bitten or scratched by the fox got it and a few sun highs later would be sick too. There was no cure but almost everyone in the clan caught it and then passed it to another clan member. They destroyed each other until only a few survived."

"The Madness," Sully nodded. "Yes. I know what that is. Cookie called it Land Drowning. She said a raccoon had it and wandered onto the Farm and Brody kept it cornered until the twoleg came and killed it with their loud stick. She said exactly what you just said about being confused and wobbly on its legs. Because of that raccoon the twolegs will stick you with a sharp twig once in a while and Cookie says its so we don't catch the Land Drowning."

"I need to eat something," Briarsong stood up and felt dizzy.

"Lay down," Sully gently nudged her and Briarsong sat, her head reeling. "I will go grab us something to eat and you rest here."

Briarsong smiled to herself as she watched the long haired tom bound off towards the stone wall that bordered the field, looking for chipmunks. He was an amazing hunter and Briarsong loved to

watch any of the Barn cats hunt. They were just as skilled as any Warrior, and defiantly more versed in different types of prey. Maybe it was time to leave Moonclan behind for good? She had everything she could ever want out of a fulfilling life right here on the Farm. As bossy as Cookie could be, she really enjoyed the elderly she-cat. There was also Brody and his nightly visits when he returned from the field, and the twolegs who would give her scratches and even sneak her little pieces of fish sometimes. Then there was Sully. Even after she had refused his advances he had remained kind and loving, never once pushing her to do anything she didn't want to. Was she silly keep waiting for Starclan to send for her like they had promised?

Chapter 11

[image]

Briarsong gulped down her chipmunk and wished that Moonclan cats knew how to catch the quick little creatures. They had a very unique taste that she enjoyed as a break from the usual mice they hunted in the Hay Barn.

"Thank you,"

"Do you feel better now?"

"I do. I really appreciate everything you've done for me."

"What else are friends for?" Sully winked and Briarsong felt a twinge of guilt. She knew the tom was in love with her, and wanted nothing more than to share a nest next to her. He probably even wanted kits and a family to call his very own, but she still wasn't sure if she could give up being a Medicine Cat. The feeling of being torn between her love and loyalty to Moonclan and Starclan and the feelings she might have for Sully were agonizing. She had sworn her life to Starclan and their strict rules for Medicine Cats. She had given up on a mate and kits back when she asked Cloverclaw to be his apprentice. Not once had she fantasized or considered her life being shared with a tom or even kits of her own.

"What are you thinking about?" Sully interrupted her thoughts. He was watching her with his memorizing eyes and it was getting harder and harder to deny the fluttering she felt in her belly whenever he looked at her like that.

"Cinderstar," Briarsong lied. "and her poor kits."

"Poor kits?"

"When Cinderstar lost Sunheart, she couldn't bare to stay with her kits any longer. She never wanted kits and I think looking at them reminded her of Sunheart. One of the other queens adopted the kits

thankfully. But to see a mother abandon her kits like that, I can't imagine it didn't do any harm to the poor little ones."

"That's very sad." Sully agreed softly. "I would have thought she would want to be closer to her kits to remind her of her mate. Every cat is different I guess."

"She went crazy with guilt and anger," Briarsong added. "She changed completely and she wasn't the wonderful cat I grew up with anymore. It was like I didn't only lose my brother, I lost Cinderstar too."

"I'm so sorry,"

"It gets worse." She whispered.

"You don't have to tell me if you don't want too." Sully was serious and his tone was stern. Briarsong gave him a sweet smile and wanted him to know how much she appreciated him,

"I know, but I think its time to let it out before it eats me alive." Sully nodded in support and Briarsong continued. "Cinderstar waged war on Mountainclan since they were the ones who killed Sunheart. She had us all storm their camp while most of them were away. Only the elderly, kits, queens, apprentices, and a few warriors were going to be there. Cinderstar said she only wanted to chase them out but of course there was a lot of death and blood instead. Medicine Cats don't really do battle so I was supposed to only be there for the wounded. I tried to get high up and away from the fighting but I ended up face to face with Cinderstar killing Pebblestone. You don't kill Medicine Cats, and she killed him as he was trying to get the elderly and the kits to safety. How could she have done that? What cat in their right mind would do that?" Briarsong had to stop and catch her breath because she could feel her heart racing in her chest, making it hard to breath.

"This is upsetting you, you don't have to continue."

"She shook him like a leaf even after he was dead," Briarsong gasped, seeing the image in front of her as if she was there again. "Then Falconstar tried to push her off the ledge but Dawncloud

came out of nowhere and stopped him. But it was too late and Cinderstar started to fall. I ran forward and grabbed her as best I could but she was pulling us both over the edge, and she wouldn't stop fighting even though it was just me there."

"Please stop," Sully interrupted. Briarsong didn't realize she was shaking and her breaths were coming in short gasps. He put his paw on top of hers but she yanked it away almost as if it were Falconstar who had touched her.

"I wanted to pull her back up." Briarsong insisted. "She was doing bad things but that didn't make her a bad cat. Maybe I could still get through to her if I tried harder. But Sunheart made me let her go." she stopped and could see her friends eyes wide with shock as they looked back up at her. To this day she didn't know for sure if Cinderstar saw Sunheart or herself standing there watching her fall. "I watched her fall and lose the last of her lives as she hit rocks on the way down. Everyone saw me standing there and they saw me let her fall. I couldn't defend myself because what was I going to say? Sunheart took over my body and made me drop his mate and our leader off a ledge to her death?" she scoffed at the idea. "Nobody would believe me."

"But it sounds like it was the truth." Sully offered.

"Would you have believed me?" Briarsong challenged. Sully hesitated and moved the dirt around with his paws. "Exactly." she grimaced. "Sunheart knew she had to be stopped before she created a war with the three remaining clans. She wouldn't have stopped until someone stopped her. I don't think the clan realized what was happening. I've known her for so long I knew the path she was heading down. But anyway, Dawncloud exiled me from Moonclan for killing Cinderstar. Falconstar exiled me from his territory, and so I just left the forest all together."

"It doesn't seem fair for Starclan to let you be exiled from your own clan for doing what they asked of you."

Briarsong thought about that for a moment. "I never really thought of it that way," she finally admitted hesitantly. She had never questioned Starclan and it was making her uncomfortable.

"It sounds like you have suffered and lost everything after only doing what you were told to do." Sully continued. "I don't think I like your Starclan very much. They sound like they don't really care about you."

"They warn us about upcoming events or help out the clan when we need answers a cat might not have. Starclan told me about Mountainclan dropping the rocks on our patrol. Only Sunheart died when it could have been more cats if Starclan hadn't warned me." Briarsong felt defensive all of a sudden. He just didn't know Starclan like she did and he would never understand. "They don't always come outright and explain things but that's because its the Medicine Cats job to figure it out. I'm the bridge between Starclan's messages for the future and my clan and it was something I accepted when I became a Medicine Cat."

"Then why did Starclan abandon you?" Sully challenged meeting her gaze. He seemed upset. "They let you get exiled from your own clan for doing the right thing, and then let you almost die in a field far from home."

"Because," Briarsong huffed, upset and flustered. "Because..."

"Why can't you leave it all in the past and accept your new life here? Starclan hadn't spoken to you have they? Nobody has come looking for you have they? Why punish yourself for a life you no longer live? Why can't you be happy here with me?" Sully's eyes were filled with longing and a twinge of frustration.

"Sorry to interrupt," Mango padded up seemingly from nowhere. She looked from Sully to Briarsong curiously.

"What?" Briarsong snapped, feeling on edge.

"Morris said he ran into a cat who said they were looking for you."

"For me?" Briarsong was so shocked all her anger and frustration melted away. Sully was by her side in a flash.

"What do they want?" He demanded.

"How should I know?" Mango shrugged. "I am not a message carrier

but Cookie said I needed to find and tell you."

"Where are they?" Briarsong asked, her head spinning. Mango gestured out towards the field. "I knew they would come for me," Briarsong whispered.

Chapter 12

[image]

Briarsong followed Mango out into the field a ways before coming to a small patch of bushes where Morris sat waiting for them.

"Told you," Mango sneered.

"Someone is here to see me, Morris?" Briarsong asked. The orange tom shrugged and got up, pointing to the bushes.

"She won't come out of there. Keeps asking for you but won't say anything else. I think I might frighten her."

Briarsong padded up to the bushes and knelt down to look in. She made out the shape of a cat but couldn't pick out details through the thick leaves.

"Hello, I'm Briarsong." she called softly. "Are you looking for me."

"Yes," came the meek voice of a young she-cat.

"Why don't you come out here and we can talk?"

"No."

Briarsong sat back and looked at Morris and Mango who were watching eagerly.

"Could you please leave us?" she asked.

"I want to see what this is all about," Mango whined.

"I already asked nicely." Briarsong warned. Mango flinched and clearly remembered their brawl many moons ago. She she-cat tossed her head and padded off with Morris following close behind. "There. They left,"

"And the big one." the voice urged. Briarsong looked over at Sully but he shook his head.

"He's okay. He's with me. Why don't you come out so we can talk?" Briarsong stepped back and stood next to Sully to give the she-cat some space. Ever so slowly the slender and wirehaired body of a she-cat crawled her way out. She looked older than she probably was, her eyes deep and sunken in, her ears ripped from fighting. Patches of her pelt were missing and her skin was flaking and covered in scabs.

"You don't remember me do you?" she asked in a soft voice.

"I'm sorry. I don't think I do," Briarsong admitted, looking at Sully with a shrug before looking back at the mangy she-cat.

"You met me back when I was Rosepaw." she she-cat prompted.

Briarsong gasped as she realized the ugly little she-cat was the Mountainclan Medicine Cat apprentice, although probably a full Medicine Cat by this point.

"Rosepaw," she whispered. "You're so much older now. You probably aren't an apprentice anymore I suspect."

"No." she shook her head. "After Pebblestone died they made me the Medicine Cat. I'm Rose*thorn* now."

"How did you find me out here Rosethorn?" Briarsong asked bewildered. "I'm not even sure I would know how to get back to the forest."

"Pebblestone showed me the way. Said to walk into the sun and not stop until I found you."

"So Starclan sent you?" Briarsong felt a twinge of excitement at knowing she hadn't been forgotten like she had feared. A twig snapped somewhere and Rosethorn darted back into the bushes.

"Flightily little thing isn't she?" Sully whispered.

"Come on out Rosethorn," Briarsong called, giving Sully a glare at

his comment. They waited patiently as she very slowly crept back out, her eyes darting around wildly as if she expected to be attacked at any moment.

"You seem really exhausted," Sully observed. "Its almost dark, why don't you sleep here tonight and rest. We can all meet back when the sun comes up?"

"Yes." Rosethorn nodded vigorously and darted back into the bushes. Briarsong was left frustrated that Sully had suggested they wait until morning to speak with Rosethorn, but she was also aware the she-cat needed to spend some time calming down.

"Let's go," Sully nodded back towards the Barn. "Brody should be coming back with the flock any second and I doubt she will talk to us while that is happening."

"I didn't even think of that. Good point." Briarsong took one last look at the bushes and followed Sully back to the Hay Barn where Cookie, Mango and Morris sat waiting.

"So I hear you have a visitor?" Cookie remakred.

"Yes. Someone I knew a long time ago." Briarsong admitted. "She's staying out in the field and we will talk with her in the morning."

"I hope you haven't forgotten about Moose's vigil?" Cookie gave her a suspicious glance. "We are to all sit here and honor his memory with out hungry bellies and quiet presence."

"Of course not," Briarsong lied. She had completely forgotten about the poor little tom because her mind was wheeling with the visit from Rosethorn. What would the Mountainclan Medicine Cat be doing all the way out here? Wasn't Sparrowkit and Cloverkit supposed to be the ones to come retrieve her?

"Good." Cookie nodded and the cats sat in silence, watching Brody and the flock return from the field, the stars light up the sky and the moon shine down on them. None of them spoke but only readjusted to get more comfortable. Briarsong couldn't have slept even if she wanted too. She was trying to imagine what Rosethorn could have

to say that a Moonclan cat couldn't have said.

As the stars vanished and the warm colors of the morning awoke in the sky, Cookie let out a large sigh and got up, shook, and headed off to her nest. The vigil was over and Briarsong felt her paws practically tingling like ants were crawling over them. She couldn't wait a moment longer and started to head back out towards the field with Sully yawning in tow.

"Can't we take a nap first?" He asked.

"You don't have to come with me," Briarsong said matter-of-factly. She slipped through the fence and headed back out into the field towards the far left where the patch of bushes were. As she got closer she saw Rosethron pop her head out. It was hard to believe, but she looked worse than the night before. Her eyes were goopy, her nose running, and she couldn't stop scratching herself.

"Are you okay?" Briarsong asked, watching as some of the scabs ripped open and started to bleed on her shoulder. "You don't look well."

"I was never very healthy," Rosethorn admitted. "Starclan is coming for me soon. My body can't go on much longer."

Briarsong and Sully exchanged a glance before Briarsong finally asked. "Why did you come to find me?"

"You're the only Medicine Cat left," Rosethorn looked her in the eyes sadly. "They are all gone. We need you to train new Medicine Cats."

"They are *all* gone? What does that mean exactly?"

"Windwhisker finally died of old age without an apprentice." Rosethorn rolled her eyes. "Meadowclan is so mousebrained. And I never got to finish my training so I am a terrible Medicine Cat, plus I'm too sick."

"What about..." Briarsong swallowed and couldn't bring herself to ask about Ivypaw. What if her little brown and white tabby apprentice had died a terrible death? What if she wasn't there to

protect her and keep her safe?

"She's disappeared." Rosethorn finished for her. "With me being useless and Meadowclan losing their Medicine Cat, it was only Ivybranch who was a fully trained Medicine Cat in the forest. First Meadowclan and Mountainclan tried to ask nicely for her to come stay with them for a while but Dawnstar wouldn't allow it. So then they tried to take Ivybranch when she was out collecting herbs. After that she vanished. You're all that is left."

Briarsong sat back and let the information sink in. She loved her apprentices full name and repeated it in her head a few times feeling closer to her than she had in moons. Why would Ivybranch disappear? Where would she possibly be hiding?

"I thought you all exiled her from the forest?" Sully said angrily. "Now you want her help? Come on Briarsong, you don't need to help them. They only came when they needed something from you."

"What are you wanting me to do exactly?"

"Find and train three new Medicine Cats," Rosethorn shrugged.

"Three?" Briarsong recounted in her head but was confused. Ivybranch was missing, but probably hiding from Mountainclan and Meadowclan, so there should only be two new Medicine Cats to train.

"I won't make it home," Rosethorn said thoughtfully. "I don't think I want to anyway. I'm just to tired and I want to rest. So you need to return to the forest to find and train a new Meadowclan Medicine Cat, a new Mountainclan Medicine Cat, and a new Smokeclan."

"I'm sorry, *Smoke*clan?" Briarsong was so shocked she almost choked.

"Oh I forgot," Rosethron took a break from talking to scratch her neck again. Between the scratching she was coughing and wheezing like an Elderly cat with Green Cough. "The clans decided to fill the Treeclan territory with a new clan. There should always be four clans and by each clan sacrificing three Warriors each, it was a way

to show unity and peace."

"A new clan made out of members of the remaining clans. And I thought I had heard it all," Briarsong was bewildered. She couldn't picture three Moonclan cats willingly giving up their home, family, friends and territory to go live with strangers and follow a leader they possibly had never met.

"It wasn't a smooth transition," Rosethorn admitted. "But they've been slowly adjusting and working on getting themselves sorted."

"How did they chose a leader? I can't imagine how that would go choosing a leader to follow that half the cat's don't even know."

"To honor Treeclan, Thrushpelt was made leader since he was originally from Treeclan anyway. It helps he knows the territory front and back already."

"And Starclan gave him nine lives?" Briarsong confirmed, finding it hard to believe the quiet Warrior from Treeclan was suddenly expected to lead a clan. Could he even do it? Could three clans create a fourth clan and it would flourish?

"I guess," Rosethorn shrugged. "He's Thrush*star* now. But they have no Medicine Cat at all. Leaf-fall is just around the corner and then Leaf-bare, so we need Medicine Cats at least in training before the cold comes. We've already had one queen lose her kits because I don't know what I'm doing." Rosethorn had a coughing and wheezing attack that give Sully time to whisper,

"You don't owe them anything," Sully hissed. "Lets just go back to the Farm now. Brody can chase her away and you won't have to worry about any of this."

"How long did it take you to travel here?" Briarsong wanted all the information before making any type of decision.

"I think its been four Sunhighs maybe five because I'm slow."

They all three sat in silence as Rosethorn started to scratch herself again. This was the moment Briarsong had been waiting for since she left Moonclan. She was finally being called upon to return to

the forest and do what she was born to do. How could she turn her back on the entire forest when they all were in desperate need of Medicine Cats? Could she really return to the Hay Barn and know the clans would suffer?

"Will the clans want to see me after what happened?"

"With Cinderstar?" Rosethorn shook her head. "When Dawnstar received her nine lives she got one from Cinderstar who explained everything. Dawnstar spent a moon looking for you and told the other clans at the Gathering to look out for you and return you home safely."

"I have to," Briarsong met Sully's eyes and saw the sorrow and fear deep within them. "Please don't be mad at me."

"I'm not letting you go four sunhighs with a cat who can hardly walk without wheezing." Sully rubbed his muzzle against her cheek. "If you must go, I will come with you to make sure you are safe."

"You aren't a clan cat," Briarsong warned. "Its a completely different life than what we have here. I don't even know what to expect when I get there."

"You tried being a Farm cat for me, so I can try being a Clan cat for you." Sully smiled.

"You don't understand," Briarsong lowered her voice so Rosethorn couldn't hear her. "If I go back I'm a Medicine Cat. Medicine Cats are loyal to Starclan and have taken vows of a single life alone. I will and must honor that vow and commitment I made while within the Clans and while I am training apprentices."

The two looked at each other for a long time in silence. Briarsong hated the thought of not having Sully by her side but she couldn't return and have the clans question her devotion. A small part of her was also worried another she-cat would snatch him up as their mate. He was a handsome fellow with his long silky pelt, and sweet personality. What would be worse; leaving him behind or seeing him with another she-cat?

"What will you do when you are done training apprentices?" Sully asked. "Will you stay in the forest?"

"I don't know." Briarsong admitted.

"Then I will come with you until you do know." Sully said. "Just let me go talk to Cookie and I will be back." He gave her a small lick on the nose and padded back off towards the Hay Barn.

Chapter 13

[image]

The pace was slow. Rosethorn couldn't go very fast and had to keep stopping to catch her breath. At this pace it would take seven or more sunhighs to get back to the forest.

"Let's stop and grab something to eat," Sully suggested as Rosethorn started to gnaw at her itchy legs. They had been traveling since sunup and now it was far past sunhigh. Briarsong found a shaded spot to stop and rest under a tree, while Sully went off to do some hunting. Before he left Briarsong met his gaze and smiled, hoping he knew how much she appreciate his sacrifice to leave behind the only family he had ever known.

Briarsong turned to look at Rosethorn who was giving her a mischievous look. "I see you made a friend while you have been away," she chuckled. "Don't think I haven't noticed your little glances and nudges."

"I'm a Medicine Cat," Briarsong stated, feeling her face get hot.

"If a Medicine Cat doesn't have a clan to protect, why shouldn't they have a mate?" Rosethorn winked but ended up coughing uncontrollably. "I always thought it was silly anyway. A leader can still lead their clan perfectly well with a mate by their side, why couldn't a Medicine Cat? I never liked the idea of a life alone in a den with no one to keep me warm at sundown."

"Pebblestone picked a very interesting cat to succeed him," Briarsong mused. "I'm surprised with how openly you talk about such things."

"Pebblestone didn't choose me." Rosethorn said sourly. "I was forced to do it. Falconstar wanted one of his kits to be a Medicine Cat so he could be closer to Starclan. I am no natural talent for herbs and I am terrible at remembering them all."

"What did Starclan say when they gave you your name?" Briarsong asked but was met with a wheezing laugh from Rosethorn.

"Starclan didn't give me my name." She finally managed to say after she caught her breath. "I went to the Seeing Stream but nobody came to me in my dreams. I think they knew I didn't want to be a Medicine Cat. So I lied and made up my own name. The only time in my life I could make my own choice."

"But I thought you said Pebblestone told you to come find me?"

"Kind of." Rosethorn gave a big grin and Briarsong saw a tooth missing and winced. "Ivybranch told me to find you. Said Pebblestone couldn't find me when I was sleeping so he passed the message to her to give to me. He said, *follow the sun until you find the lost Medicine Cat and bring her home*. My very own little prophecy. I guess I could be a Medicine Cat after all." she chuckled like it was a funny joke, then added. "That was the last time I saw Ivybranch actually."

"Ivybranch," Briarsong rolled the name around and smiled. She liked it very much and just wished she had been at the Seeing Stream to celebrate with her apprentice.

"It wasn't long after she received her name that Windwhisker died. I Can't believe that old tom lasted as long as he did. Do you know he was 180 moons? Have you ever heard of such a thing? And to doom his clan by *not* having an apprentice. What a pile of foxdung." she shook her head and some fur fell out like rain and Briarsong pitied the sick cat.

"It sounds like a lot has happened since I left," Briarsong muttered to herself. The realization that life had moved on without her was hard. The sun still rose, kits were born, and the clans continued on with their lives. She had spent so much time and energy thinking about them and wondering where her loyalties lye, but the forest hadn't stopped.

"What will you do once you are done training new Medicine Cats?" Rosethorn asked. "Will you just go back to Moonclan or go back with Sully to wherever you were living?"

"I spent so much time worrying about my duties and being a clan cat," Briarsong said slowly, thinking about what she wanted to say. "and I have been struggling to figure out whether I am still a Medicine Cat bound to my clan and Starclan or whether I am something different now. How do I know what to do?"

"Well," Rosethorn gave a thoughtful glance up at the sky.

"I have food," came the muffled voice of Sully as he proudly walked over and dropped two squirrels. "They practically threw themselves at my paws." he picked one up and passed it over to Rosethorn who shook her head.

"I appreciate it, but I'm not hungry."

Briarsong and Sully exchanged a glance. "You need your strength for this journey." Sully insisted.

"That is sweet of you, but I'm not going to make it back to Mountainclan."

"You want to live out here by yourself?" Sully asked, but Briarsong knew what the Medicine Cat meant. Sully had no experience with the difficulties of living in the forest and with Rosethorn's terrible condition, it was unlikely she could finish the trip. Accepting death and its inevitability was something Medicine Cats weren't scared to face because Starclan would be waiting to welcome them home. Clearly Rosethorn had already found peace with her fate and appeared to be welcoming the end to her suffering.

"Let's sleep and start again when the sun comes up," Briarsong suggested. "It will be dark soon and we are not familiar with this territory and what lives here."

The three cats found a thick bush and curled up underneath away from praying eyes. The night was cool and hinted that Leaf-fall was coming. Sully curled up with his back up against Briarsong for warmth and the feeling of his slowly rising sides brought so much peace of mind. No matter how hard she tried to fight it, she loved the tom. After everything she had scarified for Moonclan, shouldn't she be allowed to have her own life? Thoughts like that would have

never occurred to her before, but Moonclan clearly didn't need her. Finishing out the remainder of her life in the Elders Den sounded boring and lonely when she could be prowling the fields, hunting mice in the Hay Barn, and lounging around the Farm all day long with no worries.

"I don't know how far we are going to make it today," Sully whispered under his breath, his eyes darting over to where Rosethorn sat a ways off. Briarsong followed his glance and nodded in agreement.

"We will just have to go at her speed."

After giving Rosethorn some time to get steady on her paws, they all continued on. They didn't talk for a long time but focused on making their way through the unfamiliar territories. They took breaks to hunt, find water, or take a short nap but progress was slow. The air wasn't as hot as usual and Briarsong knew that Leaf-fall would be upon them before too long. Sully never complained about the traveling and seemed to be enjoying the trip.

"Are you going to introduce yourself as Sully?" Rosethorn broke the silence as Sully stopped to inspect a toad.

"It's my name," Sully laughed.

"Its a very, strange name. I've never heard anything like it."

"Do you think I should chose a Clan name?" Sully smiled. "That would be fun."

"You don't need to change your name," Briarsong snapped.

"I think you would have made a fantastic Warrior," Rosethorn winked. "Your clan would never go hungry with those hunting skills of yours."

"You think so?" Sully beamed.

Briarsong kept quiet and let the two laugh and fantasize about Sully being a Warrior. The light hearted conversation seemed give Rosethorn a little extra energy because she had picked up her pace

and was in high spirits. Sully got along with any cat and his friendly demeaner was making the trip more enjoyable. While the two were talking Briarsong thought about how she would choose who to train as future Medicine Cats. She had to find three apprentices from three separate clans, and train them all to be Medicine Cats. Training usually took over six moons so the clans would be in Leaf-bare without full medicine cats.

As the sky started to get dark again, the cats found a place hidden in the roots of a fallen tree to spend the night. Sully and Briarsong did some hunting but once again Rosethorn refused to eat. The cooler temperature were a welcome relief from the hot days on the Farm. Sully fell asleep instantly, not used to so much traveling, leaving Briarsong and Rosethorn to look up at the stars together.

"I haven't heard from Starclan since I was exiled," Briarsong admitted angrily. "I waited so many nights but they never answered me."

"I think we need to not put so much merit into Starclan." Rosethorn admitted. "I'm not saying we can't learn from our ancestors but we shouldn't wait around for them to tell us how to run our lives."

"I don't think Starclan tells us how to run our lives. They warn us about dangers, prepare us for hardships, and have knowledge they can pass down to their clan. Starclan warned me about the Mountainclan attack with the rocks so only Sunheart died. There could have been more deaths. And Starclan warned me about Cinderstar and what her anger would do to Moonclan if she wasn't stopped. We have a lot to learn if we choose to listen."

"Sure," Rosethorn gave a single shoulder shrug. "But at what price? I would rather face the future with a fresh outlook than be told what to do."

"You are a very interesting Medicine Cat," Briarsong mused. "How do you think the clans will respond to me being back?"

"They know I'm brining you back to train the new Medicine Cats, and they are very excited. Maybe having a second Medicine Cat in the forest will allow Ivybranch to come out of hiding. She won't be

a target anymore."

"How am I supposed to know who to train? Just chose three random apprentices?"

"Not my problem," Rosethorn gave a wheezy laugh and rolled over, placing her tail across her eyes. "My job here is almost done."

Chapter 14

[image]

The sounds of birds awoke Briarsong from a deep sleep. With a yawn she looked around and saw that Sully was still asleep, but Rosethorn wasn't next to her. Getting up quietly, she squeezed herself out from the roots and into the misty morning. She looked around but didn't see Rosethorn in the immediate area. Maybe she finally got hungry and went hunting? Sniffing around she found the sour smell of the sick cat and followed it away from the straight path they had been taking and up a rocky hill. The trees fell away and Briarsong slowed down as the tall grass and bush gave way to a rocky outcrop with very little places to hide. Moving a slowly, she stepped out from the shadows and moved onto the stone where she could smell the strong scent of Rosethorn's sickly skin.

"Isn't it beautiful?" the cracked voice of Rosethorn came from up ahead and Briarsong padded out and found the she-cat looking out over a vast forest below her. The view was stunning and unlike anything Briarsong could have ever imagined. It simply took her breath away to look down and see the mist had settled just on top of the trees making it look like a large body of water.

"It is wonderful," Briarsong agreed. "We really should keep moving."

"I'm going to stay here I think," Rosethorn whispered, closing her eyes and taking a deep breath. "It's quiet here."

"You can't sit here in the open. Something will come eat you. Come back with me and we will go wake up Sully and keep going. I'm sure your clan will be happy to see you."

"I am so tired," Rosethorn's voice was faint and Briarsong saw she was slumping over with exhaustion. Taking a few quick steps forward she braced her shoulder against the sickly she-cat and held her up.

"Isn't it beautiful?" Briarsong whispered to Rosethorn as the she-cats eyes started to blink slower and slower. Rosethorn made a soft purr of agreement and Briarsong slowly helped her lay down on the cool stone. They looked out over the ledge together and Briarsong felt Rosethorn's sides start to slow down as her breathing became labored.

"Do you think Starclan will welcome me?" the far off voice asked. Briarsong looked down and touched noses with her friend.

"Pebblestone will be anxiously waiting for you." she whispered softly. With that answer Rosethorn took in one last breath and let it out before going limp.

Briarsong lay with the deceased Rosethorn for a little while before getting up and dragging her body out from the open and into the bushes. The poor sick she-cats suffering was finally over.

Briarsong and Sully traveled most of the day in silence only stopping a few times to drink or hunt. If Rosethorn had followed the sun to the Farm, they would go away from the sun to make it back to the forest.

"What do we do when we get there?" Sully asked as they settled down for another night.

"Well," Briarsong folded her paws underneath her. "I suspect we will go back to Moonclan. I'm not exactly sure how I will find the right apprentices from three different clans but I'm hoping Ivybranch might have some answers for me."

"Isn't she missing?"

"I suspect she's in hiding if three other clans are desperate enough to try and steal the last fully trained Medicine Cat."

Sully frowned. "If you are a Medicine Cat, shouldn't Starclan be telling you what to do?"

Briarsong didn't answer the question because she didn't know the answer. She had gone so long without hearing from Starclan she wondered if she ever would again. Instead of answering she yawned

to indicate she was done with the conversation. Sully gave her a concerned look but didn't ask anything else.

Briarsong and Sully stood looking at the invisible border into Mountainclan. The smell was strong and a patrol had been by recently.

"Is there another way to Moonclan?" Sully asked, clearly uneasy now that he was facing the reality of an entire clan of cats who might not be friendly.

"We might be able to follow the border from Mountainclan around to the border of what is now Smokeclan, but I'm not sure if we can sneak into Moonclan or not that way. I've never been on this side of the border to the clans. And if we go around it might take us an extra sunhigh."

"If Rosethorn was from Mountainclan, and they know she was going to get you, then we should be safe right?" Sully looked at her with his ever too trusting eyes and Briarsong started to worry about him accompanying her on this trip. What if there was an attack? What if they didn't accept him?

"I think what we should do is walk the border between Smokeclan and Mountainclan and head straight into Moonclan that way. Hopefully the two clashing clan scents will mask us until we can re-enter Moonclan territory. If I remember correctly, there is a strange space of territory between the two borders that doesn't belong to either clan but I've never been to it before. Only heard about it."

"We better hurry and get moving then."

Briarsong could see that Sully was nervous, and she didn't blame him. With a flick of her one good ear, she took off down the invisible border that was Smokeclan and Mountainclan. It was easy to follow the two strong scents and she tried to move as quietly and quickly as possible. She could feel Sully close behind her but he wasn't as quiet as she would have liked and his long pelt kept rustling the plants as they went by. Afraid Sully would be heard she picked up the pace a little more to try and get out. Suddenly the two border scents separated left and right as if going around

something.

"This must be the dead zone," she whispered as Sully padded up next to her, breathing heavily. "Neither clan owns it."

"Why?"

"I've only herd rumors. Only Mountainclan and Treeclan knew for sure. I think it had something to do with..." she stopped and laughed to herself. "Well that is probably why." She pointed with her tail for Sully to look at the large bushes with little red berries hanging off.

"A bush?"

"Those are death berries. I've never seen so much growing in one place before. I bet they were worried about apprentices eating them and just built their border around them to prevent any accidents."

"What's that?" Sully's hair stood on end and his ears flattened against his head. He was staring into the death berry bushes. Briarsong squinted and finally saw realized there was something hiding within the bushes. The first thought that came to her mind was a fox and she took a slow step backwards, debating which territory to run into.

"Briarsong?" a familiar voice whispered from within the death berry bush. "Is that really you?"

"Ivybranch," Briarsong felt her breath catch in her throat with excitement. The tabby and white she-cat emerged from the thick bush with a huge smile. She was older than last time Briarsong had seen her, and was a fully grown and mature cat now. Her tabby pelt was slick and shinny and her white tummy and paws were like clouds.

"Rosethorn found you," Ivybranch purred as she approached and rubbed her muzzle against Briarsong's cheek. "Where is she? And who is this?"

"This is Sully." Briarsong introduced the large tom who gave a embarrassed smile. "Rosethorn didn't make it back." she added

softly. Ivybranch nodded in understanding and didn't seem surprised.

"Is this where you have been hiding the whole time?" Briarsong looked around at the small area.

"Nobody dares come over here for fear of stepping on the berries and getting their poison on their paws. It has been a great place to hide. Not great hunting but if you wait quietly a mouse or squirrel will come by."

"We're headed to Moonclan, come back with us." Briarsong suddenly remembered to whisper and looked around nervously. "Three of us can't hide here long."

"Yes I agree. Follow me," Ivybranch gave Sully a last unsure glance but led the band around the deadly red berry bush and back onto the border between the two clans. Ivybranch moved swiftly on nimble paws as she weaved her way down the border between the two clans. Briarsong kept her ears pricked, her tail low and her paws a light against the earth as she could. Sully sounded like a lumbering badger compared to the two she-cats but Briarsong just prayed to Starclan that no cats were nearby.

"There," Ivybranch whispered over her shoulder. "Moonclan is just up ahead. Hurry," she picked up the pace and Briarsong followed as the three leapt out of the bush and landed safely back into Moonclan territory. The familiar smells brought comfort and warmth to Briarsong's heart and she took in a deep breath, hoping to carry the feeling with her just a few moments longer.

"You're as loud as a badger," Ivybranch scolded Sully. "It's a wonder the entire forest didn't come to investigate. Does your clan not teach you how to walk silently through the forest?"

"I'm not from a clan," Sully gasped, trying to catch his breath. "I've never had to worry about it before."

"Well we will have to teach you then," Ivybranch muttered. Briarsong gave her apprentice a small shrug when she looked over for an explanation.

"Let's hurry back to camp, get everyone fed, and then come up with a plan." Briarsong decided. Ivybranch nodded in agreement and allowed Briarsong to lead the way down the familiar path back to camp. Briarsong could feel Sully keeping up the brisk pace right behind her, with Ivybranch padding along right by her side.

As the fallen tree entrance to camp came into view and the familiar sounds of cats became apparent, Briarsong slowed down and hesitated. Already she could smell and hear voices she didn't recognize and knowing how much she had missed was scary to face.

"Don't worry," Ivybranch reassured her. "They will all be so excited to see you."

"You got this," Sully whispered in her ear. "You're the bravest cat I know."

Taking a shaky step forward, she followed Ivybranch through the camp entrance with Sully right on her tail. There were only some minor changes to the camp itself but what was so socking were the amount of cats who she didn't know. So many kits had become apprentices and then Warriors and she had missed it all. These cats probably didn't even know who she was even after all the moons she served her clan.

"Briarsong," a loud gasp broke through the camp chatter and all the cats looked towards her. Dawnstar met her eyes from the fresh-kill pile and her jaw hung open in shock. The two looked at each other like long lost siblings and it was Dawnstar who bounded forward and rubbed her cheek against Briarsong's, purring loudly.

"I'm so sorry," Briarsong found herself saying.

"No," Dawnstar shook her head and pulled away, her brownish ears flickering. "I'm sorry I didn't stop for a second and consider why you would have done something like that. Let's put it behind us and focus on the fact that you are here now." Dawnstar looked over Briarsong's shoulder then back at her, "Who is your friend with you?"

Chapter 15

[image]

Briarsong was overwhelmed by the outpour of love from Moonclan as all the Warriors who remembered her came over to touch noses. Appleblaze and his brother Voletail were so much more filled out and mature looking than last time she had seen them. They were handsome Warriors who bore a scar or two from battles she had missed. Cloudpelt and Thistletalon were also coming into their own with scars and thicker frames as they were getting older. Mouseclaw, Littleleaf, and Eveningmist looked relatively the same from the last time she saw them. There were also cats she didn't recognize who hung back and eyed her with puzzlement. Pathcpelt was holding himself differently. He had his shoulders squared, his head held high, his tail a flag high in the air. A large scratch across his muzzle showed where he had survived a great battle and his black and white pelt was sleek.

"Come with me," Dawnstar guided Sully and Briarsong away from the mass and into the quiet of her den.

"A lot as changed," Briarsong whispered. "It's hard to believe I've missed so much. Who is your deputy?"

"Patchpelt is the deputy now," Dawnstar sat down and wrapped her tail around her paws. "He's a very skilled and talented Warrior who had seen it all. He has done a wonderful job so far keeping the clan motivated, planning patrols, and training apprentices."

"What else have I missed?" Briarsong wanted to know everything so she could ease the aching feeling that she didn't belong anymore.

Dawnstar gave a light hearted chuckle. "A lot has happened in the forest that I don't have time to go into great detail about. I will give you a few big highlights from Moonclan though."

"Yes please."

"Runningtail and Pinebrush passed last Leaf-Bare protecting Ivybranch when the Meadowclan stormed the camp and tried to drag her away."Briarsong took a moment of silence for the loss of the last remaining member of her family. "Eveningmist had two more kits, Firekit and Thunderkit who are in the nursery. Snowlight is also in the nursery with her and Cloudpelts' kits Breezekit and Flurrykit. Cloudpelt remains the clans most skilled hunter and keeps us fed even during the hardest of times. His brother Thistletalon isn't quite as skilled a hunter but has a real knack for building. He has done an amazing job with Mouseclaw at fixing up the camp walls. Right now we have seven apprentices, the most we've ever had at one time. A few of them are close to taking their test while a few aren't quite ready."

"Which cats left for Smokeclan?" Briarsong asked.

"Ivybranch told you about Smokeclan?"

"Rosethorn did."

Dawnstar nodded. "Thrushpelt is now Thrush*star* of Smokeclan."

"Who exactly is your friend here?" Dawnstar finally looked over at Sully who was anxiously waiting.

"This is Sully." Briarsong introduced the long haired tom. "He is one of the cats I've been living with. He wanted to see Moonclan and everything I've been telling him about."

"Welcome, Sully." Dawnstar smiled but Briarsong didn't miss the suspicious glare. "We are happy to have you here in Moonclan. Thank you for accompanying Briarsong home. While you are here you can sleep in the Elders Den since it is empty at the moment. I will have one of the Warriors show you where to hunt and we will expect you to help feed the clan."

"Of course," Sully nodded and twitched his tail nervously. "Anything I can do."

"So what is your plan for finding and training three new Medicine

Cats?" Dawnstar turned back to Briarsong and she could feel the relief from Sully now that the attention wasn't on him.

"My plan is to go to the Seeing Stream with Ivybranch and see what Starclan has to say."

"Hmm," Dawnstar was thinking. "I'm not sure how easy it will be getting through Smokeclan and Mountainclan territory to get to the Seeing Stream. We aren't exactly on friendly terms after they tried to steal Ivybranch to be their Medicine Cat."

"I have to at least try," Briarsong insisted. "I don't know a better way to get a clearer connection straight to Starclan."

"No you are right. I'm just worried about the journey is all."

"I would like to accompany her and Ivybranch to keep them safe." Sully piped up. Dawnstar was clearly shocked at such an idea and gave Briarsong a blank look of disbelief.

"Accompany two Medicine Cats *too* the Seeing Steam?" Dawnstar finally asked.

"It could be a good idea," Briarsong interjected. "He's not a clan cat so doesn't follow our same rules and codes. Having a body guard to watch over us while we sleep would be really helpful."

"I guess," Dawnstar hesitated at the idea of a cat other than a Medicine Cat going to the sacred Seeing Stream. "If you think it would be okay."

"Have a few Warriors take us to the Smokeclan border, and Sully will get us the rest of the way."

Dawnstar looked from Briarsong to Sully and narrowed her eyes suspiciously. Briarsong felt her paws twitch and her face get hot but she knew she had done nothing wrong, whatever Dawnstar might be thinking. She loved Sully but she hadn't allowed anything to happen other than friendship.

"Okay then. Go eat, rest, and we will take you to the Seeing Stream tonight."

Briarsong padded into the Elders Den where Sully lay, his paws tucked under his chest.

"Settled in?" Briarsong asked, looking around the den as if she expected her father Runningtail to jump out. It was weird knowing he was gone and she wished she could have been with him.

"Yes. A few of the Apprentices brought me some moss and a mouse. I am having a hard time keeping everyone straight but I think it was Fernpaw and Brightpaw."

"Are you ready to head to the Seeing Stream?" she purred, giving his head a gentle lick.

"Yes." He got up and gave his pelt a quick shake. "Lead the way."

Briarsong led Sully out of the Elders Den and into the cool evening. Appleblaze, Cloudpelt, Mouseclaw and Ivybranch were already waiting by the entrance. It was nice to be walking next to the Warriors she had grown up around. It made her feel like the old days again.

"Everyone this is Sully," Briarsong introduced everyone and was relieved by how welcoming and friendly the Moonclan Warriors were. They didn't act as suspicious and unsure as Dawnstar had. Appleblaze was by far the friendliest and she hoped the two would become friends.

"Dawnstar said we are to walk you to the Smokeclan border, and Sully will escort you to Seeing Stream?" Appleblaze confirmed in a questioning tone.

"That is the plan." Briarsong agreed.

"Smokeclan doesn't really have patrols yet since they are still getting established, so should be fine until you reach Mountainclan." Cloudpelt added. "With Rosethorn fulfilling her prophecy to go find and return you to the forest they *should* leave you alone if you run into any patrols."

"When as Mountainclan ever done what they *should* do." Mouseclaw chuckled bitterly.

"Even so, we have to go." Ivybranch said. "We have to go."

With Appleblaze in the lead, the small patrol made their way out of camp and through Moonclan territory back to the Smokeclan border where Briarsong had been earlier that day. As they approached she had a flashback to the last time she had been to Seeing Stream and been met by her old friend and the then apprentice Ivypaw. It seemed like another lifetime ago that that had happened and now she felt like a stranger approaching the now Smokeclan border. The scent of Smokeclan was almost nonexistent and no cats had been by in many sunhighs.

"You are all good," Cloudpelt whispered after sniffing around for a little to make sure there was no lingering scent hiding. "I would still move swiftly and not stop, but no cat has been by here in a while."

"Thank you." Briarsong smiled at the three Warriors, meeting each of their eyes in turn. She wanted them to know how much she missed them and appreciated their friendship and loyalty.

"We will wait here for your return," Appleblaze promised.

"Take care of them," Mouseclaw gave Sully a serious look. "If we find out they have been injured by so much as a squirrel, we will hold you responsible."

Briarsong led Ivybranch and Sully over the border into Smokeclan and the three quickly made their way down the familiar path to Seeing Stream. Unlike the last time she had been, the trip was quiet and tense. The trip through Smokeclan was quick and uneventful. As the three pulled up to the Mountainclan border they weren't as lucky.

"Who is this?" came a hiss from the bushes. Briarsong stopped and felt her fur prickle down her spine.

"Briarsong, Ivybranch and Sully. We are going to the Seeing Stream."

The cat came out of the bushes, her ears forward and her tail flicking. "Is Rosethorn with you?" she asked, looking around for the

Mountainclan Medicine Cat.

"No." Briarsong said softly. The she-cat looked confused and called out for Rosethorn as if she were simply hiding like the game apprentices play.

"I am Rosethorns' sister, Brackenfrost." the she-cat explained. "I've been checking the borders for her hoping she would return. I see she found you Briarsong, but I don't see her with you."

"Rosethorn didn't make it back to the forest." Briarsong said sadly. "But she died by my side looking out to the vast mystery and beauty of an unknown forest."

"That is how she would have wanted to go," Brackenfrost hung her head, her tail dropping down to the ground. "Thank you for not letting her die alone."

"I'm sorry for your loss," Ivybranch added. "She was a lovely cat with a very wonderful personality. I enjoyed our trips to Seeing Stream together."

"In honor of Rosethorn, I will make sure you get to the Seeing Stream safely," Brackenfrost held her head up and Briarsong could see her face was wet from crying. "Come with me." she black she-cat turned on her paws and led the patrol into Mountainclan territory. Brackenfrost didn't say much, so Briarsong let the silence guide them safely.

"Thank you," Ivybranch whispered as Brackenfrost sat down and pointed towards the Seeing Stream outside of the Mountainclan territory.

"Than you," Sully added as he followed Ivybranch. When Briarsong came up to the young she-cat she met her yellow eyes.

"Do you think," Brackenfrost hesitated then continued. "She went to Starclan? Even if she wasn't really..."

"I believe Rosethorn is in Starclan with her mentor Pebblestone and all the friends and family she has lost." Briarsong said sternly. Brackenfrost looked pleased and even smiled a little.

"You will always have one friend in Mountainclan." Brackenfrost said before disappearing into the shadows.

"Briarsong, let's go." Ivybranch called. Turning around, Briarsong crossed the border out of Mountainclan and she led the way through the brush and into the clearing where the Seeing Stream lay bubbling and gurgling. Ivybranch wasted no time in taking a small sip of the cool water and then hunkering down. It was only a few moments before she was fast asleep leaving Sully and Briarsong alone.

"Are you sure?" Briarsong asked.

"I will keep you and Ivybranch safe." Sully smiled. "I can't talk to Starclan, but I can do this." he moved in to rub her cheek but then stopped. He pulled back slowly and Briarsong knew he wasn't sure what to do now that she had stepped back into her old role.

"See you soon." Briarsong padded up to the edge of the stream and looked down into the water that reflected the stars like snowflakes. She was terrified nobody would be there when she fell asleep and that fear made her shake.

Chapter 16

[image]

Briarsong opened her eyes and felt relief flood over her.

"Welcome home," Cloverclaw purred. "Its nice to see you again."

"It's nice to see you again too," Briarsong smiled but felt annoyed that there was no apology for their silence.

"Hello again," came another voice from behind her and Briarsong was shocked to see Ivybranch sharing in her dream.

"We're glad you are finally back in the forest." Flowertail announced with a gleeful smile. "Safe to say they all really need your help."

"How am I supposed to know which apprentices are right to be a Medicine Cat if I don't know any of the apprentices in any of the other clans?" Briarsong asked, deciding to stick to business instead of asking why Starclan hadn't spoken to her since she was exiled. Flowertails smile quivered at the coldness of Briarsongs reply.

"We can help you out with that thankfully," Cloverclaw continued. "And then once you find and speak to the three apprentices you will train them at night in their dreams so that during the day they can explore their own territories to find the herbs you teach them about."

"Ivybranch can help with this as well." Flowertail added. "With the two of you it shouldn't take too long to get all three into a comfortable spot before Leaf-bare."

"Have three fully trained Medicine Cats before Leaf-bare?" Briarsong asked, narrowing her eyes slightly.

"Oh no." Flowertail shook her head. "Not fully trained between you and Ivybranch and we're hoping they will be well equip to make it

through Leaf-bare."

"That should be doable." Ivybranch nodded. "We can work them hard throughout the night and then they are responsible for putting that into practice during the day. We can hopefully work them double time to speed up the training."

"Exactly," Cloverclaw purred. "What a power team we have here. I am so happy to have you two back together."

"How do we know which apprentices?" Briarsong brought back up. As much as she enjoyed seeing Cloverclaw and Flowertail, she found that the hurt she harbored bore deep into hear heart.

"We don't know their names," Flowertail said slowly. "But we can tell you what they look like."

"That's better than nothing," Ivybranch chuckled.

"From Smokeclan there is a grey tabby tom, Mountainclan there is a dark tawny tom, and in Meadowclan there is a orange and white she-cat."

"Thank you," Briarsong dipped her head and turned to leave.

"Wait," Flowertail called and reached forward out. "Don't be mad," she whispered into Briarsong's ear. "I didn't abandon you. You just went further than our skies reach."

Briarsong felt the fur along her spine slowly relax as she felt a hot tear roll down her cheek.

"This is your last job for Starclan if you so choose it to be," Cloverclaw padded forward and touched noses with Briarsong. "You have created a lovely new life for yourself and your clan is in good paws with Ivybranch. If you decide to leave the forest you will be relieved of any and all Medicine Cat duties and laws. The choice will be yours."

"You will always be welcome to join Starclan when its your time," Flowertail added with a smile. "You will never be turned away, no matter what you decide. There is a spot here for you my sweet

friend."

Briarsong awoke and looked over to see Ivybranch slowly awakening. Sully padded over to check on her but she reassured him she was fine and he backed off to let her wake up.

"We might as well find the dark tawny tom in Mountainclan on our way home," Ivybranch said with a yawn.

"I agree," Briarsong nodded and stretched out her legs. The stiffness of age was not lost on her and she thought about the easy life the Farm had been. Briarsong led the group back to the Mountainclan border where Bristlefrost emerged from the shadows to greet them.

"We would like to come to your camp to find your next Medicine Cat." Briarsong told the she-cat. "Starclan has told us who to look for but hasn't given us a name."

Bristlefrost hesitated for a moment, thinking about what she should do. "Okay then." she finally said. "Follow me."

Briarsong, Ivybranch and Sully followed the dark she-cat through the brush and then up the natural stone walls until she stopped at a cave entrance. Two large toms were sitting out front and glared at the patrol.

"What is this Bristlefrost?" hissed one.

"These are the Moonclan Medicine Cats and they just came from the Seeing Stream. They are here to reveal our next Medicine Cat apprentice to us."

"And you just brought them to our camp?" the second tom hissed, flattening his ears against his head.

"Where else was I supposed to take them?" Bristlefrost snapped. "They are here to help so I suggest you move aside and let us in." The two toms glared at each other before moving aside to let the cats through. Briarsong felt Sully stiffen next to her and she prayed to Starclan he could hold his own.

They entered the dark, damp cave and into the open space that was

the Mountainclan camp. It was hard to see for the Moonclan cats but the Mountainclan cats moved around with ease.

"What is this Bristlefrost?" Falconstar spat as he padded up from the shadows.

"We are here to find your next Medicine Cat." Briarsong spoke up and met the leaders mean and cold eyes. "Please bring all your apprentices out for us to find the one Starclan has told us about."

There was silence around the camp as Mountainclan cat eyes shone in the darkness like little lightening bugs. Falconstar clearly hated being told what to do, but he wasn't stupid and knew Briarsong spoke the truth. The large tom huffed, annoyed, then called out the apprentices from their den somewhere in the darkness. Five Apprentices slinked forward and into the little amount of light that snuck through the rock ceiling.

"We're looking for a tom," Ivybranch said and watched as three of the Apprentices stepped back, only leaving two standing before them. Briarsong looked from one to the other but found it was hard to tell all the dark pelted cats apart. The Mountainclan cats all held their breath in anticipation as Ivybranch and Briarsong looked from one tom to the other.

"What are your names?" Briarsong asked. The first tom stepped forward and held his head high.

"I am Darkpaw," he announced. He was a dark tom with a black and brown pelt.

"I am Thornpaw," the other tom was a little more shy but stepped forward with a dark brown and dusty orange pelt. Briarsong knew instantly it was little Thornpaw who was the next Medicine Cat and looked over to Ivybranch to see if she agreed. Ivybranch met her gaze and nodded.

"Starclan sent us to reveal your next Medicine Cat," Briarsong announced to the entirety of Mountainclan. Her voice reverberated off the stone and startled her at first. "Thornpaw here will succeed Rosethorn and we will train him until he can take over duties on his

own."

A roar of excitement erupted from the Mountainclan cats at the relief that they would indeed have a new Medicine Cat. Thornpaw's eyes were wide with shock and his looked at his paws, embarrassed.

"Please show us the Medicine Cat den so we may speak to Thornpaw alone," Ivybranch said to Falconstar. The leader dipped his head and led the four cats over to a smaller cave within the cave and the old smell of Rosethorn lingered at the entrance. Briarsong went in first and was surprised by how small the space was. Thornpaw followed with Ivybranch taking up the rear. Sully stood guard out front, unable to fit inside.

"Hello Thornpaw. I am Ivybranch, Moonclans Medicine Cat, and this is my mentor Briarsong. We're here to explain to you your training process since it will be nontraditional."

"I never really considered being a Medicine Cat," Thornpaw admitted with a sheepish grin. "But I like the idea of healing my clanmates instead of fighting."

"That is great to hear," Briarsong purred. "The way Starclan has explained it to us, is that Ivybranch and myself will be training you at night in your dreams so that during the day you can explore your own territory to put what you've learned into practice."

"In my dreams?" the apprentice laughed. "That is silly."

"I know it sounds mouse brained." Ivybranch admitted. "But you just have to trust us."

"Okay, I guess."

"We will see you at the next sundown. For now rest and explore the Medicine Cat den." Briarsong told the apprentice. He nodded in agreement and stayed behind as Ivybranch and Briarsong wiggled their way out of the den to regroup with Sully.

"Bristlefrost will take you to the Smokeclan border," Falconstar said. "Thank you." he added before padding off. Bristlefrost came back up and led the cats through the darkness, across the cold stone ground,

and out of the caves and into the night. She led the cats down the stone wall and back to the forest floor before heading off towards the Smokeclan border.

"That was easy," Sully whispered into Briarsong ear. "Do we go back to Moonclan now?"

"Here is the border," Bristlefrost announced, coming to a halt. "Thank you for everything." she added.

"Goodbye Bristlefrost," Briarsong touched noses with the Warrior before leading everyone across the border into Smokeclan.

"We're already here," Ivybranch stopped a few fox lengths in. "Why don't we just stop by the Smokeclan camp? That way we can make the journey to Meadowclan when the sun comes up."

"That is not a bad idea." Briarsong agreed. "I know where Treeclan's old camp is so I can get there."

"Sully, can you please go back to Moonclan and tell the patrol waiting for us that we are heading to Smokeclan and we will make our way back to camp after we visit Smokeclan?"

"Er. Leave you?" Sully hesitated and looked at Briarsong for direction.

"You can follow our scents back to Moonclan territory," Ivybranch continued. "I don't want Appleblaze coming in search of us."

"It's okay." Briarsong added and Sully gave a small nod. He waited a moment longer and then padded off into the brush back the way they had originally come from Moonclan. Briarsong waited for him to be completely gone from her sight before realizing that Ivybranch was watching her closely.

"If he's just a friend then I'm a squirrel," she chuckled. Briarsong felt her face get hot and she pushed passed her old apprentice and led the way to where she had once been led by Flowertail to the Treeclan camp.

Chapter 17

[image]

As they approached the log that crossed the river that led to the old Treeclan camp, Briarsong remembered the last time she had been there and shivered.

"I don't like being above water like this." Ivybranch muttered as they slowly made their way across. Once they landed safely on the other side.

"It's strange walking so easily through another clans territory," Briarsong noted as she led them closer to the old Treeclan camp. "Just doesn't feel right."

"Briarsong, Ivybranch!" came a welcoming voice and the two she-cats were relieved to see a familiar face. The dusty orange tom leapt down from a large stump with a huge grin on his face.

"Thrushpelt - I mean *star*!" Briarsong laughed out loud at how happy she was to see him. He was one of the original survivors from Treeclan and seeing him back in his old clans territory was a wonderful sight.

"What are you doing here?"

"Starclan has sent us to find your new Medicine Cat." Ivybranch explained. "We just need to see all the apprentices that Smokeclan has."

"*All* the apprentices," Thrushstar laughed. "Meadowclan only sent two apprentices over as volunteers so there aren't a lot to look at."

"Makes our job easier."

"Of course. They should be asleep in their den, come with me." Thrushstar led the two medicine cats through the camp entrance.

He padded over to a bramble and reed den where two small bodies lay sleeping. "Wake up," he whispered softly. The two lumps stirred and one little head looked up.

"What is it Thrushstar?"

"I need you both to come out here with me for a moment. Can you please wake Dewpaw?"

Briarsong waited patiently next to Ivybranch a fox length away from the Apprentice den and waited for the two sleepy Apprentices to arise. It wasn't long before they came tumbling and yawning out of the den.

"Hello there." Briarsong said sweetly. "I'm Briarsong, former Medicine Cat of Moonclan, this is Ivybranch."

"I'm Dewpaw." the little brown she-cat introduced herself.

"I'm Rainpaw." the grey tom introduced himself.

"Can we please speak with Rainpaw in the Medicine Cat Den?" Briarsong asked Thrushstar. He nodded and pointed towards a small stone cave across camp. Rainpaw followed hesitantly as Briarsong led him into the old den that Ivybranch once used.

"I think I'll just stay out here for this one." Ivybranch called to Briarsong. "It's a little too much to be back here."

"Why do you need to speak to me?" Rainpaw asked as he followed Briarsong into the Medicine Cat den.

"Starclan has sent us to train you to be Smokeclan's Medicine Cat."

"Me?" Rainpaw was stunned. "You must be mistaken. I'm going to be a Warrior."

"Starclan and Smokeclan need you to be a Medicine Cat." Briarsong explained. "Ivybranch and I will be training you and two others from the other clans."

"What if I don't want to be a Medicine Cat?" Rainpaw challenged. "You can't make me do it."

"I can't make you do anything." Briarsong agreed. "But you have been specifically chosen for the skills you posse and the possibilities before you. A Medicine Cat is stronger than any Warrior, braver than any leader, and wiser than any Elder. To be a Medicine Cat you need to be able to think clearly in difficult situations, remember all the different herbs, and decode different dreams from Starclan."

"I guess that sounds exciting," Rainpaw mumbled.

"Just think about it and I will see you next sundown in your dreams."

"My dreams?" Rainpaw scoffed.

"Medicine Cats have lots of dreams." Briarsong winked. She got up and left the Medicine Cat den, feeling absolutely exhausted. Thrushstar came to meet her and said goodbye before she exited the camp and met Ivybranch just outside.

"Rainpaw isn't sure he wants to be a Medicine Cat." Briarsong explained when Ivybranch asked.

"Give him time to think it over."

"I'm ready for a mouse and an entire moon of sleep." Briarsong laughed tiredly as she and Ivybranch made their way back across the river and down through Smokeclan territory.

The sun was high in the sky before Briarsong woke up. She still felt tired but managed to drag herself up and out of the Medicine Cat Den. The camp was alive with cats coming and going and the energy was high. She had gotten so used to the slower pace of the Farm that so much hustle and bustle was overwhelming for a few moments as she stood still and let herself adjust.

"Fresh-kill pile was just restocked. Sully is a fantastic hunter. He probably could catch about half as much as Cloudpelt." Voletail said to Briarsong.

"He didn't even come close to half," Cloudpelt roared with laughter. "No cat can come close to catching half as many mice as I can."

"I don't know about that." Voletail winked at Briarsong. "Sully was pretty close."

"Where is Sully?" Briarsong asked.

"I think I saw him talking with Fernwhisper and Littleleaf." Cloudpelt looked around. "Ah yes. He's over there." Briarsong thanked the two toms and made her way over to the fresh-kill pile. She noticed immodestly how close Fernwhisper was sitting to Sully. Fernwhisper's tail was flicking back and forth slowly, occasionally brushing against Sully's shoulder or his back. Littleleaf was also there but seemed oblivious to what Briarsong was seeing.

"I heard you were as good as hunter as any senior Warrior." Briarsong said as she got within ear shot. Sully looked up from his conversation and gave her his big goofy grin that she had learned to love. Fernwhisper gave a small frown as she approached, and Briarsong enjoyed seeing the young she-cat squirm a little.

"I don't think I'm that good." Sully chuckled. "I just know how to catch mice."

"Don't say that." Fernwhisper said, giving him a gentle shove. "You made Cloudpelt nervous you might break his record of 12 mice."

"Fernwhisper right?" Briarsong turned to the she-cat who had narrowed her eyes slightly. "Cinderstar's kit?"

"Yes." Fernwhisiper nodded.

"I haven't seen you since you were a kit in the nursery. It's nice to see you again. You must have a mate and kits by now?"

"No." Fernwhisper grumbled sourly then gave Sully a big smile. "I'm waiting for the right tom to come along. I haven't been impressed with the Warriors here in Moonclan."

"Briarsong," Dawnstar's voice came sternly from behind her and Briarsong looked over her shoulder and was met with a firm but

kind look. "Can you please come with me?"

"You probably have important *Medicine Cat* duties to get too." Fernwhisper sneered. "But don't worry because I'll show Sully around and help him get settled in." Briarsong was torn for a moment but eventually turned to follow Dawnstar back to her den.

"While you are back in Moonclan you are expected to uphold your Medicine Cat duties and vows." Dawnstar whispered in a firm voice as they entered the leaders den. Briarsong opened her mouth to object but Dawnstar shook her head. "Don't say anything. I just want you to hear me. You were gone almost two Leaf-bares and that is a long time to away. I don't judge you for what you did or did not do in that time but while you are here training the entire forests Medicine Cats, I need you to represent the Warrior Code, Moonclan, and what it means to be a Medicine Cat. Am I clear?" Briarsong was so shocked by the leaders bluntness that she could only nod. "Good. Ivybranch already left with Voletail, Patchpelt and Mouseclaw for Meadowclan. That way if anything mousebrained happens we don't loose two Medicine Cats."

"She left without me?"

"I need you here just in case Meadowclan tries to pull something. I don't think they will, but they are very unpredictable."

"What am I supposed to do until they get back?" Briarsong felt an empty feeling in her heart that she had to ask such a question in her own clan. She had no job here anymore. Now that Ivybranch was the Medicine Cat she wasn't needed and had no real skills left to offer.

"Just rest or feel free to join a patrol if you want to get back out into the forest. Either way Ivybranch and the other should be back by nightfall and hopefully we will have the last of the new Medicine Cat apprentices chosen."

Briarsong wandered back into camp and looked around for Sully. She didn't see him but couldn't stand the thought of waiting around camp not doing anything.

"Is there a patrol going out any time soon?" She called to Appleblaze who wasn't far off.

"Actually you're in luck. Dawnstar was going to have me put one together. Want to tag along?"

"That would be great." Briarsong felt relief flood her.

"Let's check who is in the Warrior Den."

Briarsong waited as Appleblaze put together a small patrol including Cloudpelt, Littleleaf and Thistletalon. He led the way out of camp and back out into the forest.

"Glad to have you back with us," Appleblaze said with a purr. "I know we all missed you."

"Didn't feel the same for quite some time." Cloudpelt agreed.

"A lot has changed." Briarsong admitted. "Its a little strange to know how much I have missed."

"Well it is nice to know you are home now," Cloudpelt said and Briarsong wondered how much of that was true. Was she home? Moonclan used to be her home and still held a special place in her heart, but is it where she wanted to spend the rest of her life?

Chapter 18

[image]

Briarsong walked back into camp from an afternoon out in the forest with Applebalze, Cloudpelt and Mouseclaw. She had enjoyed catching up with old friends, revisiting familiar places, and learning about all the clan drama that had been going on. Briarsong had been surprised to learn that Appleblaze was Dawnstar's mate while Mouseclaw and Littleleaf had broken up so that Littleleaf could be with Bramblesun. All the new couples and the many kits were hard to keep track of but were very exciting to hear about. The camp was alive with kits playing with a dead mouse, Warriors sharing tongues, and a general overall feeling of calm. For Moonclan the burdens the other clans carried without a Medicine Cat were nonexistent. Moonclan was strong with a lot of young, healthy Warriors who were eager to serve their clan. Prey was starting to grow scarcer as Leaf-fall grew closer but the cooler temperatures were bringing a whole new joy energy as the hot days became fewer.

"Ivybranch is back," Dawnstar called over and Briarsong gave her a nod of appreciation and made her way to the Medicine Cat den where Ivybranch was finishing up a squirrel.

"Did you find the third apprentice?"

"Yes. Her name was Berrypaw and she seemed a lot more interested than Thornpaw did."

"Well that is good to hear." Briarsong agreed. "Tonight is the first night we start their training. What do you want to start with?"

"I would say the most basic herbs they would use most often and explain what they look like, how to find them, dry them, and when to use them."

"Agreed. Then they can go looking for it in their own territories to start stocking up their dens."

"Yes. Get them as prepared for Leaf-bare as possible."

"That's at least four or five moons away before the snow comes." Briarsong said thoughtfully.

"Are you going to be staying with us through Leaf-bare?" Ivybranch asked, trying to pretend to be casual. Briarsong frowned and didn't answer the question. "At some point you have to make a decision."

"What would you do?" Briarsong snapped. "It's not like its an easy decision whether or not to leave Moonclan and never come back." She got up peeved, and exited the den to find Sully.

He wasn't hard to find with his big fluffy pelt and Briarsong padded over to where he sat talking with Cloudpelt, Appleblaze, Bramblesun and Fernwhisper. The sight of Fernwhisper's made her stomach clench. The beautiful grey blue she-cat with one white paw was so clearly Cinderstar's daughter and held herself with just as much elegance and grace as her mother. To be jealous, and even angry at a she-cat who was doing nothing except flirt with the handsome stranger was ridiculous. Briarsong tried to get a grip of herself and put on her best fake smile as she sat down with the group.

"Your friend here has been a great help today." Appleblaze announced as Briarsong sat. "He has been a fantastic hunter and having an extra set of claws around as really been great. Everyone will eat well while Sully is in Moonclan."

"Don't get your tail in a knot," Cloudpelt laughed. "I still hold the record for the most mice caught in one hunting patrol."

"We know we know. It was 12 mice," Fernwhisper rolled her eyes.

"And don't you forget it," Cloudpelt winked.

"Daddy!" came the shrieking voices of Cloudpelt's kits as they came running from the Nursery and bowled into the white tom. Flurrykit was a longhaired white tom with brown on his nose, ears, and

speckled throughout his pelt. Breezekit was a short haired grey white she-kit with one blue eye and one brown eye.

"Do you want kits?" Fernwhisper leaned on Sully whose eyes darted over to Briarsong. Briarsong felt her tail stiffen and her heart completely stop in her chest. Sully gave an awkward shrug and tried to take a step away but Fernwhisper leaned on him more so he couldn't move.

"Yeah," Appleblaze added. "Do you have a mate and kits where you come from Sully?"

"No I do not have either." Sully explained. "I live with a small group of cats but I do not have a mate or kits."

"That's too bad." Fernwhisper said in a silky tone. "You would be a great father and a catch for any she-cat."

"Give the tom some space Fernwhisper." Bramblesun sneered. "You don't need to throw yourself onto any available tom. I thought you were in love with Voletail?"

Briarsong was pleased to see Fernwhisper squirm with embarrassment at the mention of Voletail. Breezekit and Flurrykit were called back to the Nursery by Snowlight and the conversation around kits and mates left with them. Briarsong was relieved to hear Appleblaze start talking about borders and other clans. She sneaked a peek at Sully and saw him looking at her with his warm eyes. He tried to give her a little apologetic grin but was quickly pulled into the conversation by Bramblesun who wanted to know what Sully thought of the four clans.

The clearing was nondescript with only some stumps and bushes. Briarsong and Ivybranch sat patiently waiting in the Starclan built training camp for their new apprentices to arrive. Rainpaw was first to appear and the tom eagerly went exploring his new dream training camp. Berrypaw was next to join and she was a little more hesitant but not unwilling to check things out. Thornpaw arrived last with a grumble.

"Welcome to your first training session." Briarsong called the three

apprentices in to start. "We will be pushing you hard since we do not have the luxury of taking our time. We expect you to train hard here at night, and during the day to go put what you have learned into practice."

"We will be starting with beech leaves, blackberry leaves, borage leaves, burdock root, burnet, catchweed." Ivybranch reached down and the beech leaves appeared on the ground. She started to explain the look, feel, scent, and use of the leaf before having the apprentices come up to check it out for themselves. Briarsong followed with blackberry leaves and borage leaves. The two medicine cats pushed a lot of information onto the three apprentices long into the night, only stopping when a nondescript light started to shine in the of their Starclan training camp, alerting them that the sun was coming up.

"You did a really great job for your first training session. What do you think so far?" Briarsong asked.

"I can't wait to serve my clan as a Medicine Cat," Rainpaw purred proudly. "I will be the first and best Medicine Cat of Smokeclan."

"Its boring," Thornpaw muttered bitterly. "Why should I care about leaves?"

"Its fine." Berrypaw whispered shyly.

Briarsong and Ivybranch said goodbye to their apprentices and watched them leave one at a time back to their own clans.

"One down," Ivybranch smiled. Briarsong nodded but didn't reply.

Briarsong and Ivybranch took turns sleeping and upholding Medicine Cat duties. They both were exhausted from training all night and Briarsong was grateful she finally had something to do by helping Ivybranch while she slept. The day fly by quickly as she slept, ate, and helped Ivybranch around camp. She only saw Sully once when he was being escorted out of camp by Fernwhisper. Dawnstar was putting Sully to work and Briarsong was impressed with how well he was keeping up with clan born cats.

The first moon of training went by without incident. The three apprentices worked hard memorizing the herbs in the Starclan Training Camp and then would go stock their own dens during the day. Thornpaw had grown to be the quickest learner and was way ahead of Rainpaw and Berrypaw. His hesitation to be a Medicine Cat had all but melted away as he excelled in his new position got to go back and tell his clan he was the best. Ivybranch and Briarsong took turns with exercises to help the apprentices learn the herbs and tell them apart. Berrypaw lagged behind in the learning but only because of her lack of self confidence. She knew the information but didn't trust herself. Briarsong had to spend extra time working with her separately so that she didn't get overwhelmed by Thornpaw and Rainpaw trying to whisper the wrong answers to her.

After the long nights of training the apprentices, Briarsong found she didn't have the time or energy to do much besides sleep and help out with Medicine Cat duties. She tried to seek out Sully but he always seemed to be out hunting or patrolling in the forest. When he was in camp he was surrounded by his new friends or Fernwhisper was hanging all over him, making it impossible to pull him aside to talk. Briarsong had decided the only way to handle the situation was to push her emotions down, focus on training the three apprentices, and deal with her heart after it was all over.

Chapter 19

[image]

Briarsong and Ivybranch were relaxing in the Medicine Cat den after a particularly hard night of training their apprentices when Fernwhisper peeked her head inside.

"Hello," Fernwhisper announced herself.

"Hello." Ivybranch drew herself back up onto her paws. "How can we be of help?"

"I think I'm with kits." Fernwhisper made direct eye contact with Briarsong who was so surprised her jaw hung open.

"That is wonderful." Ivybranch purred. Briarsong felt a tail lay across her paws and knew Ivybranch was warning her to stay neutral. "Would you like me to feel around you belly?"

"Yes." Fernwhisper padded into the den and lay on her side for Ivybranch to push around on her belly.

"It is still early, but I would hesitate a guess and say you are probably with kits." Ivybranch announced after a few tense moments.

"Aren't you going to ask me who the father is?" Fernwhisper sneered. Briarsong tightened her jaw and felt her claws digging into the dirt floor of the den. Ivybranch sat on Briarsongs tail to try and keep the situation under control but Briarsong already knew the name based on the sneer of triumph on Fernwshipers face.

"I am sure whoever the father is he will be very happy to celebrate with you privately." Ivybranch said sternly. Fernwhisper glared at her and then met Briarsong's gaze before saying.

"They are Sully's kits."

"Why are you doing this?" Briarsong blurted. Ivybranch tried to grab her but she was already up and in the she-cats face. "He's a lot older than you and he's not even going to be staying here in Moonclan."

"This is for getting both my parents killed." Fernwhisper growled. "Payback for all the heartache and loneliness you caused me and my siblings when you didn't get to Sunheart fast enough, and then dropped Cinderstar to her death. It's because of you we were orphaned. Now you feel the pain of loss."

Briarsong was so shocked she took a few paw steps backwards.

"I think its time for you to leave." Ivybranch escorted the she-cat out of the den. "Briarsong," she whispered. "they might not be Sully's. Fernwhisper has a reputation around camp for going after any tom who is even a little bit nice to her. There are still a few single toms in camp, it could be any of them."

"I didn't know she hated me." Briarsong squeaked out. "Do all of Cinderstar's kits hate me?"

"No." Ivybranch licked her mentors shoulder. "Fernwhisper just has a lot of issues of her own. She's a terrible hunter, failed her Apprentice test three times, and was turned down by Voletail multiple times. She is just spiteful and wants to feel in control. I highly doubt they are even Sully's kits."

"I need to know for sure." Briarsong didn't let Ivybranch stop her as she left the den to find Sully. She was lucky and found him asleep in the Warrior den after looking around camp for a little while. She nudged him awake and pulled him to a private spot next to Dawnstar's den where a large branch stuck out and gave them a little privacy. He was still very sleepy and kept yawning.

"It is true?" Briarsong hissed in a low whisper after they were situated.

"Good to see you too." Sully gave her a light hearted smile. "Its been a long time since we could talk just the two of us. Now I'm not mad, I know you are super busy being important. But I have missed you

and I am so glad you came and found me."

"Fernwhisper just came to see us in the Medicine Cat Den," Briarsong shot at him. Sully looked genially confused. "She is with kits."

"Good for her. Who is the lucky tom?"

"She says its you." Briarsong felt her heart beating so fast she was worried Sully could hear it. Sully's eyes grew wide and he stiffened.

"Me? That can't be true." He shook his head.

"You are together a lot." Briarsong challenged. "I see you walking out of camp together to hunt, and I see her hanging all over you."

Sully narrowed his eyes and flicked his ears. "I'm sorry I made friends. Its not like you are available to go hunting or hang out with."

"Friends? Appleblaze is a friend, Cloudpelt is a friend. Fernwhisper says she is carrying your kits."

"Okay so maybe she is a little flirty." Sully admitted with a shrug. "But she doesn't mean any harm by it. She's just a young she-cat with a lot of energy and emotions. I'm just being friendly."

"Look me in the eyes and tell me she isn't carrying your kits." Briarsong said with a fear that bore into her very soul. Sully met her eyes with his usually warm and inviting ones. She remembered the many afternoons laying in the sun together, the many evenings they waited for Brody and the Farmer together. He had taught her how to catch mice and had been there for her when she was afraid and sad. He had never pressured her to love him in return but had allowed her to be who she was.

"I don't think she is carrying my kits." Sully said very slowly and very deliberately.

"What do you mean *think*." The two cats stood looking at each other for a few moments and Sully didn't reply at first.

"There is a very small possibility they are mine. But its very small and I don't think they are."

"How could you?" Briarsong couldn't hold back the rage that was blazing inside her.

"How could I? I've loved you since you would sit in the window at the twolegs and we would talk all night long. I've been patient and I've been your friend for a very long time but when you brought me to this unfamiliar place with all these strangers and then disappeared to go train, I got confused and lonely."

"I didn't force you to come here." Briarsong spat back. "I never begged you to come."

"You wouldn't have would you? You would have easily just left me behind if I didn't come." Sully snapped. He was mad too. "I give you my love, my friendship, and you would have just easily left me behind."

"I would have only left you to protect you from the dangers of clan life." Briarsong defended herself. "I didn't know you would fit in so easily. I was worried they would pick on you."

"Cats who love each other don't leave each other behind. They brave the dangers of the unknown together because they are stronger together than apart."

"It doesn't matter if I love you if they end up being your kits." Briarsong said softly, feeling defeated and exhausted all of a sudden. "We'll know in two moons for sure."

"I don't think they are mine." Sully was practically in tears but Briarsong couldn't meet his gaze for fear that he could be wrong. "Please don't shut me out." be begged.

"I need to focus on training the new Medicine Cats. When Fernwhisker has her kits we will talk again." Briarsong pushed passed him and back out into camp where she scurried back to the Medicine Cat den.

Chapter 20

[image]

The trees were beautiful shades of red and gold, and the unbearable heat had passed leaving behind a crisp breeze. Squirrels were busy hiding their nuts and simultaneously forgetting where they put them. The first Gathering the new Medicine Cat apprentices were to attend was tonight and Briarsong was nervous. She and Ivyrbanch had been working hard to drill as much information into the Apprentices as quickly as possible so they were prepared for Leaf-bare. They had spent over a moon working nightly with them and pushing them harder than any Medicine Cat Apprentice had been pushed. Thornpaw continued to shine brightest with his bottomless pit of knowledge as he soaked up every lesson and memorized it. Rainpaw required a lot of extra one-on-one time because his nervousness caused him to second guess himself, but he was still steady moving forward with his training. Berrypaw was easily distracted, hard to keep focused, but passionate about learning. Training apprentices was a great way to keep busy and emerge herself back into clan life. Briarsong gave her everything to prove she was a clan cat, but deep down, she missed waiting for Brody and the flock every evening.

Briarsong grabbed a vole from the fresh-kill pile but paused when she heard some of the Warriors whispering.

"Have you seen how big Fernwhisper is getting?" Ivyfeather whispered to Littleleaf. "I heard the father is Sully."

"I heard the father was Voletail." Littleleaf argued.

Ivyfeather scoffed. "She couldn't win over Voletail. He's too much tom for her. I think it was most likely Mouseclaw. She was taking him out on private hunting trips. Bramblesun said he saw her with him a couple times."

"Mouseclaw is probably trying to get back at me for leaving him." Littleleaf nodded. "After the second litter of kits didn't make it, I just

couldn't look at him anymore. He said he understood but I think he's still mad about it."

"It would be like Fernwhisper to get pregnant with Mouseclaw's kits just to annoy you." Ivyfeather shook her head in disappointment. "She could have been a great Warrior if she wasn't so self-centered and just plain terrible to be around."

Briarsong moved on and thought about what she had heard. Fernwhisper hadn't announced a father but it did sound possible that it might not be Sully after all. Briarsong had only talked to Sully once or twice since their fight when he tried to apologize, but she felt so betrayed she couldn't even meet his eyes. Fernwhisper was due soon and they would all know for sure once they saw what the kits looked like. Mouseclaw was a grey tawny tom, Voletail was a grey and white tom, and Sully was a long haired tom with a brown face, tail, and shoulders. If the kits weren't Sully's could she forgive him for having a fling with Fernwhisper? Could she trust him with her heart, trust him to protect her at all costs, and trust him to grow old with? Cats made mistakes and she wasn't perfect herself, but could she forgive him? Would he forgive her if she had done the same thing? As much as she loved seeing Dawnstar and Ivybranch and the other Warriors it didn't feel the same anymore. She was on the outskirts of their groups, lost during their conversations about other clan cats, and the new younger Warriors didn't know her at all. Life had completely moved on without her and the clan hadn't stopped. She didn't doubt that some of them had missed her and mourned her disappearance, but while she had spent every day wondering about them, they were worrying about food and borders and kits.

"Are you going to eat that or just hang on to it for a while?" came a soft chuckle. Briarsong didn't realize she had been standing still as stone, amerced in her own thoughts.

"Oh, I, er, got distracted." Briarsong muttered through the vole.

"I see that." Dawnstar smiled warmly. "Why don't you and I take a little patrol." Dawnstar turned and led the way out of camp, passed Voletail and Bramblesun who gave them both a smile. Being out of camp felt freeing and Briarsong felt all her muscles relax almost as

if they had been holding their breath. Her ears twitched as she listened to the rustling of squirrels in the leaves, and smelt the wet ground. Everything around her was alive but also still. The smallness of the camp suddenly felt suffocating and the freedom of the forest brought with it relief. Briarsong followed Dawnstar through the Moonclan territory away from the bordering clans and towards the less used parts of the territory. The trees thinned out and the underbrush of brambles, fallen limbs, and tall grass built its own natural tunnel. Ahead a tall elegant deer looked up and watched as the two she-cats made their way past and it stomped its foot in warning. As they emerged from the natural tunnel the edge of Moonclan territory where the large flat stones that stuck up out of the ground lay soaking up the sun.

"I always wondered why Moonclan didn't better utilize this part of our territory." Dawnstar mused as she made her way onto the stones where a harsh drop on the other side led to a dried up creek. "I think it's because there was that poor apprentice who got kicked and killed by a deer out here. The deer aren't scared of us and aren't afraid to trample or kick. But its so beautiful over here. So far away from the other clans. For a moment you almost feel like the only cat in the entire forest."

"I used to come here for herbs quite often." Briarsong looked around and smiled at the memory. "The deer were used to me and left me alone. Although I could see a frisky apprentice getting into trouble with the deer. There are also fox that live out here too. Dangerous place if you don't know how to move around it."

The two she-cats sat on the warm stones and looked out over the drop below into another section of the forest that belonged to the fox, deer, and traveling twolegs.

"I came here once with Cinderstar," Dawnstar pointed out past the dried creek. "I made it just to that stump before getting scared and coming back. She said it was a Moonclan traditions that a new Deputy had to show their bravery and get to the stump."

"I didn't know that," Briarsong looked over at Dawnstar.

"She said it was because we had to face the unknown and overcome

it for our clan. Patchpelt made it a little past the stump before a acorn fell and knocked him in the head and he came running back." both she-cats laughed. "I know it's silly to do, but at the time it felt so special to be out here, just Cinderstar and I, and trying to make it out into the uncharted part of the forest for my clan."

"I miss her a lot." Briarsong admitted. "I never wanted to let her go. I thought I could change her. But Sunheart did what he had to do to keep the forest from going into an all out war."

"I miss her too." Dawnstar said sadly. "I try every day to be like her. Do you know, Cinderstar gave me my fifth life. She told me I needed to love my clan, love the forest, love my job, love Starclan, and find the ability to love another."

"You love Appleblaze..." Briarsong offered.

"I do love him." Dawnstar nodded. "Cinderstar loved Sunheart more than her clan, and she realized that after his death left her with a hole in her heart. I love Appleblaze but not more than my clan. I learned from her mistakes that a mate is not more important than my duties to protect and lead." She looked over and Briarsong met her gaze. "Fernwhisper is pregnant with Mouseclaw's kits."

"What?"

"They planned it on purpose. Mouseclaw wanted to get back at Littleleaf for leaving him, and Fernwhisper was made at you so wanted to hurt you through Sully. I'm not proud to have petty Warriors like that in my clan, but," she shrugged.

"How long have you known?" Briarsong asked, feeling a little angry at Dawnstar for holding back information like that.

"I believed you needed to look deep within and decide how much Sully meant to you so you can decide your future after your time here is done. I'm obviously glad you are here helping us, and I missed you terribly, but you aren't the same cat who served under Cinderstar. You've seen things, you've experienced love, and you have new life you created for yourself."

"So you brought me all the way out here so I would tell you that I love Sully?"

Dawnstar gave her a playful shoulder shove. "I knew you loved him the moment you two walked into camp. The way you look at him whenever you walk by, the way he talks about you to the other Warriors. He adores you. Honestly I've never seen you so happy and silly. It's like watching two Apprentices fall in love."

"But what he did with Fernwhisper. I don't know how to forgive that. I trusted him and he did that to me."

"I know you are mad at him for having a fling with Fernwhisper and you have every right to be. Just think that when New-leaf comes, your job here will be over and you will have to decide whether to stay or go back to where you came from with Sully."

"How am I supposed to decide such a thing?"

Dawnstar gave her a shrug. "You already know the answer. You knew the answer before you even made it back to the forest. You don't need me to tell you. As your Leader I hope you stay here and keep Moonclan safe with your vast knowledge. As your friend, I want you to smile every day the way you smile when Sully walks by."

Chapter 21

[image]

All four leaders stood high above the clan cats. Briarsong, Ivybranch and the three apprentices stood close by next to the deputies. All four clans were in good spirits and the air was relaxed.

"Welcome," Featherstar called down to the clan cats. "Meadowclan is proud to announce we have two new Warriors who are sitting Vigil tonight: Heronwing, Rabbitpoune and Crowflight worked hard with the help of their mentors to earn their rightful names. Meadowclan is also happy to announce that Berrypaw has filled the Medicine Cat den with herbs she has collected in our territory. Although Windwhisker will be missed, she is honoring him with her outstanding performance as a Medicine Cat Apprentice." the ravine errupted in cheering and Briarsong gave Berrypaw a little nudge to stand up and acknowledge the praise given to her by her leader. "We are also pleased to announce more kits were born. Meadowclan is prosperous."

"That is great news Featherstar." Thrushstar praised the leader. "Smokeclan is making slow but steady progress as we build ourselves up. We are stronger every day as our Warriors learn their territory and create tight bonds. I'm sorry to announce the loss of our Deputy Brindleface to a tragic accident falling off a fallen tree and into the water. We are also excited to announce that our Medicine Cat Apprentice Rainpaw has stocked his den and is excelling at his duties far beyond what we could have hoped in such a short period of time. Dewpaw is getting ready to take his Warrior test with his mentor and hopefully we will have a new Warrior soon. To our delight the first kits of Smokelcan were born last night and they are proof in the future of Smokeclan." Everyone cheered for Smokeclan and Rainpaw was too shy to get up and acknowledge the praise from his leader.

"Mountainclan is also thriving," Falconstar cut off Thrustar who took a step back and didn't argue with the older more experienced leader. "Our kits are strong, our apprentices fierce, and our Warriors big and powerful." Briarsong looked down at Thornpaw who looked disappointed he was the only one not to get acknowledged by his leader.

"Moonclan is happy to have Briarsong home," Dawnstar spoke up. "Happy to have her leading the training alongside Ivybranch for the future generation of Medicine Cats. They both have been working tirelessly alongside the three Apprentices to get ready for Leaf-bare. At this time their projected end of training will be New-leaf which is a relief to everyone. Our Warriors are strong and healthy with new kits on the way from our former leader Cinderstar's daughter, Fernwhisper. Times are good."

The gathering dispersed and the three Apprentices went off to meet other cats from other clans as Ivybranch had directed them too, leaving Briarsong alone as she watched all the cats find one another and catch up. She had never really liked Gatherings, but they had never felt so lonely as they did now. She was a fully trained Medicine Cat sitting among four clans worth of cats and she felt like an outcast. Then a particular pelt caught her attention and she recognized Bristlefrost. Padding over to the Warrior Briarsong made eye contact and smiled.

"Hello again," she said. "Nice to see you."

"It is always nice to see you as well." Bristlefrost smiled back. She was a lot less ominous looking outside her territory. "Thornpaw is doing a fantastic job. Better than Rosethorn ever could have done."

"Rosethorn did the best she could," Briarsong objected. The two she-cats chatted about basic topics like prey before they were interrupted by Falconstar calling his clan to leave. Bristlefrost said goodbye and Briarsong found her Apprentices to say goodbye to them as the clans started to head home.

"As Medicine Cats we have to look out for one another." Briarsong explained, looking from one apprentice to the other. "We don't ignore another Medicine Cat who asks for help. We don't let cats

from another clan die when we could have provided herbs, and we never ignore a cry for help."

"I'm not helping Rainpaw just because he can't remember the difference between yarrow and poppy seeds." Thronpaw sneered. Poor Rainpaw never even raised his glance from his paws, his eyes permanently glued to the ground.

"I'm not arguing with you about it *again*." Ivybranch said sternly. "We all learn at a different pace and there is nothing wrong with that."

"They are all just jealous," Thornpaw threw his head up. "That I'm so much smarter than both of them."

"Go choke on a squirrel bone," Berrypaw muttered under her breath. "Then at least we don't have to hear you talking."

"Stop it." Briarsong growled at the three. "You will be earning your full names in three moons but not if you are going to bully one another like kits."

"Sorry Briarsong," Berrypaw immediately apologized. Thronpaw rolled his eyes but didn't add anymore negative comments.

"You can get off early tonight. Go rest," Ivybranch dismissed the apprentices then turned to Briarsong with a huge yawn. "I'm going to bed, see you soon."

Briarsong's eyes flew open as Snowsight shook her with her paw.

"Fernwhisper is kitting and its not going well." she whispered. Briarsong got up and looked over to see Ivybranch still sleeping. Grabbing a couple things, she followed Snowsight into the Queens Den where she found a struggling Fernwhisper huffing and puffing.

"Help me," Fernwhisper cried. Briarsong stopped a moment before taking her time to pad over to where the queen lay, clearly in distress.

"Admit Sully isn't the father," Briarsong whispered into the she-cats ear as she bent down to drop her herbs.

"What?" Fernwhisper hissed glaring at her with bright yellow eyes.

"Admit you did this just to hurt me." Briarsong didn't blink and met her gaze with her own harsh one. The Queen was panting from straining but her attitude was just as fierce as always.

"This is mouse brained. Help me!"

"Admit it." Briarsong challenged her once again. "Or I won't help you."

"You're a Medicine Cat. You *have* to help me," Fernwhisper snarled, but her eyes showed fear. She looked around the den wildly but Eveningmist didn't meet her gaze and Snowsight didn't come to her aid. Briarsong sat back and looked at the she-cat and shrugged.

"Fine!" she spat. "I admit it. They aren't Sully's kits."

Briarsong stood up with a nod of acceptance. "That wasn't too hard was it?"

"Just help me!"

Briarsong felt around on Fernwhisper's belly and didn't like what she felt. She quickly mixed a few herbs together to feed the Queen but didn't have high hopes.

"Will she be okay?" Snowsight asked.

"I don't know how many of your kits are going to survive." Briarsong informed Fernwhisper.

"You did this," Fernwhisper tried to sit up but couldn't and fell back on her side.

"Don't be mouse brained you silly she-cat." Briarsong had no patience. "I can't control such things."

"How is she?" Ivybranch asked as Briarsong exited the Queens Den.

"Only one kit survived." Briarsong said sadly.

"How many were there?" Ivybranch looked back at the den but didn't go in.

"Five kits in total. Probably better in the long run. The clan doesn't need five more Fernwhispers."

"Did she name the surviving one?"

"Lizzardkit."

"Who does it look like?" Ivybranch tried to sound casual but Briarsong knew what she was getting at.

"Its a beautiful grey and white tom. Looks just like Cinderstar actually."

"Mouseclaw," Ivybranch muttered. "He's probably the father." Briarsong shrugged as if she didn't care. The warm light from the sun was just peaking through the trees and Patchpelt was gathering the morning patrol together and Sully emerged from the Warriors Den and met Briarsong's gaze. She tilted her head towards the private spot next to the Leaders Den and slipped away from Ivybranch.

"Fernwhisper had her kit." Briarsong announced as Sully joined her. "Its a little grey and white tom. Most likely Mouselcaws' kit, whether or not he will ever know..." They sat in silence for a while as the sounds of Patchpelt and the patrol leaving camp could be heard in the distance.

"Where do we stand?" Sully finally asked. Briarsong took a deep breath before answering.

"Do you regret it?"

"Yes." Sully nodded his head vigorously. "It was a huge mistake and I regret it very much. I was weak and vulnerable and she prayed upon it."

"When I'm done here," Briarsong gestured around the camp. "Are you planning on returning to the Farm?"

"I have enjoyed meeting your clan and I appreciate their hospitality, but this is not my home. I am ready to get back to Cookie and Brody. It's been fun to pretend to be a clan cat, but its not for me."

"This should all be over by the end of Leaf-bare." Briarsong said with certainty. "and as soon as the first warm day comes I would like to return to the Farm with you."

Sully let out a joyful gasp. He reached out and rubbed his nose against Briarsong's cheek and gave a deep purr. The warmth of his love emanated from his body and Briarsong soaked it all up. She wouldn't forget his mistake, but she would chose to forgive him since it did appear Fernwhisper had taken advantage of his friendly and earnest personality.

Chapter 22

[image]

"Where is Berrypaw?" Ivybranch leaned over and whispered into Briarsong's ear as Thornpaw and Rainpaw quizzed each other on the different berries.

"It's not like her to miss a training." Briarsong agreed. "Something has to be wrong."

"I'll finish up here," Ivybranch offered. "if you want to see if you can figure out why Berrypaw isn't in her training."

"Sounds good." Briarsong agreed and closed her eyes before waking up in the cold Medicine Cat Den with Ivybranch curled up next to her. The night sky had no stars and no moon and the air was a biting cold. She snuck into the Warrior Den and looked around before prodding Patchpelt who let out a small groan and opened one eye.

"I need an escort to Meadowclan. I think something is wrong and I don't want to get lost in the forest with the snow."

"Of course." Patchpelt sat up and stretched. "Let me get Appleblaze and Cloudpelt to join us. We will meet you by the camp entrance." Briarsong nodded and went to wait. Pathpelt brought the two Warriors and the four of them headed out of camp and were met with the white snow. Some of it was already packed down from the cats coming and going from camp, but the further away they got, the icier and higher the snow got.

"What do you think is wrong?" Patchpelt asked as they made their way slowly through the cold snow.

"Berrypaw didn't show up to her training tonight. She's never not showed up before."

"Everyone stay close," Applebalze called back from a fox length ahead. "The wind is picking up."

The cats lowered their head and trudged forward as the wind blew sharp flecks of ice into their faces. Briarsong squinted hard and followed Appleblaze's black and white pelt, until she realized she wasn't following him at all and was alone. She looked around and called out for her clanmates but her voice was snatched up and blown away as the wind cried and howled through the forest like a dying cat. Looking around she tried to find her baring's but everything was white and she couldn't tell a the sky from the ground. Fear gripped her as she hunched her back against the strong winds and felt the snow piling up around her.

Then a shimmer caught her eye and she saw the snow swirling in a pattern instead of randomly like before. The snow spun in a cone shape and then back down to the ground where the outline of a cat waited. She couldn't tell who it was, but she slowly moved one paw in front of the other as she trudged her way through the packed snow and ice. The snow cat waited until she was only a fox lengths away before turning and guiding her through the never ending white. Snow Cat led her through what Briarsong could only assume to be Moonclan territory. Every time she thought she lost the Snow Cat, they would reappear just a fox lengths away to guide her steadily forward.

Then they emerged from the forest and the wind was quicker and harsher than before, telling Briarsong they had arrived to the edge of Meadowclan territory. The world was still a whiteout and the only thing visible was her own paws in front of her. Trusting in whoever Starclan had sent to guide her, Briarsong fought against the cold and followed blindly.

"Who is there?" called a voice from up ahead. Briarsong couldn't see anyone and for a second wondered if she was imagining the voice, but incase she was wrong, she answered.

"Briarsong, Medicine Cat from Moonclan," she called, looking around for the body of the Snow Cat but realizing they were gone.

"Briarsong! Come this way." The body that was attached to the

voice emerged from the haze of snow and stood closely by her, using their shoulder to guide her into the Meadowclan camp. Once they were inside camp, the cat shook their pelt of the snow and revealed a ginger tabby pelt underneath.

"Berrypaw didn't show up to training and I thought something might be wrong." Briarsong explained to the cat as she shook the cold ice from her pelt and shivered. Her torn ear was the coldest part and she tried to warm it with her paw.

"I'm so glad you came. Hurry, this way!" The cat didn't stop for pleasantries and practically shoved her through the snow filled camp towards what she assumed was a den. She stumbled into the chilly den to be met with the sound of labored breathing. From what she could make out, four figures were laying in the den with a smaller cat padding between them.

"Briarsong!" Berrypaw cried with delight. She made her way over and touched her nose to Briarsong's cheek in welcome. "You have to help me. I don't know what to do. I tried bright eyes for the cough and then catmint when that didn't work. I then used chickweed and chervil but those didn't help either."

"What are the symptoms?" Briarsong looked around at the four cats who smelt of sweat and fever.

"Ummm..." Berrypaw was clearly overwhelmed and her eyes were wide with fright. "I don't know." she stammered.

"When did this start?" Briarsong tried again. "Think."

"It started three sunhighs ago." Berrypaw closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

"Good. Good girl. Now, what were the symptoms?"

"Aches and pains, then a small cough, followed by fever and loss of the use of their limbs."

"Black Cough," Briarsong moaned. "I didn't think I'd see it again in my lifetime."

"Black Cough?"

"Three or four Leaf-bares ago Moonclan got it and we almost all our elders and kits to it."

"Is there a cure?" Berrypaw asked desperately.

"Not that I found." Briarsong said sadly, meeting golden gaze of her apprentice. "I could only ease their suffering. But I never found a way to cure it."

"We have to cure it," Berrypaw's voice cracked. "We have to. Featherstar is on his last life!"

"Is he in here?" Briarsong looked around and Berrypaw pointed to a figure towards the back. Briarsong padded carefully around the other cats until she came to the dark gray body. "Featherstar," she whispered into the leaders ear. She saw one eye open and it couldn't focus on her but she knew he could hear her. "You are going to die Featherstar." she continued. "I wish I could help you but there isn't anything I can do. I will make you comfortable and Berrypaw will take care of you." the toms head gave a very small nod and his eyes rolled back into his head.

"Where is your deputy?" Briarsong asked, "Wildheart should know Featherstar isn't going to make it." Berrypaw looked blankly up at Briarsong. "Berrypaw, this is important. Where is Wildhheart?" Berrypaw gulped and turned her head to another form in the den. "Oh no." Briarsong groaned.

"He started feeling sick right before the snow storm," Berrypaw said softly.

"Is anyone else affect who isn't in this den?"

"No. If any cats showed any symptoms I moved them in here and way from everyone else."

"Good job, Berrypaw." Briarsong purred proudly. "If only four cats have it then we might be able to keep this under control. So I know Featherstar and Wildheart are in here, who are the other two?"

"The cream and white she-cat over there is Wonderfrost, and the black and brown she-cat is Beetleshade."

"Can you grab me some feverfew?" Briarsong asked as she inspected Beetleshade who seemed the healthiest out of all four. "And some water."

Berrypaw brought back piles of snow and Briarsong and her apprentice helped each cat eat the snow until they felt refreshed. After she crushed up the feverfew and mixed it with a little bit of mouse to help it go down easier. All the cast ate the feverfew except Featherstar who was practically nonresponsive. Once everyone was fed, watered, and medicated, Briarsong and Berrypaw sat next to each other on the side of the den quietly and watched.

Briarsong jolted awake, and looked over to see Berrypaw checking in on each cat. The howling and crying of the wind outside was still strong and flakes of ice would occasionally soot into the den and sting their skin with its sharp edges. Berrypaw was making her way around the den slowly, speaking softly and kindly to them even if they couldn't her her. She stroked their heads and nuzzled their shoulders to let them know they weren't alone as they died slowly. When she reached the back of the den she flicked her tail for Briarsong to join her.

"I think he's going." Berrypaw looked down at her leader with respect and sadness as the dark gray tom's sides slowed.

"Yes." Briarsong agreed. Berrypaw rested her head on her leaders shoulder and curled up next to him for warmth. The little white and orange apprentice whispered prayers to Starclan for Featherstar to have a quick and painless passing. The leader took one last gasping breath before he was completely still. What little warmth in his body was quickly snatched away by the the snowstorm leaving an empty shell behind. Berrypaw let out a small gasp and her eyes shone brightly as she stood and had her first greeting with Starclan. Before her stood the old Medicine cat Windwhisker with his large looming form. He reached out and touched noses with Berrypaw and spoke words only she could hear. Briarsong stood back out of respect and waited for Windwhisker to leave and guide Featherstar's soul up into Starclan.

When the Starclan cat was gone, Briarsong smiled warmly at her apprentice before returning to care for the other three cats still in the den. Neither spoke about what had happened with Windwhisker and instead focused their energy on trying to save the remaining cats.

Chapter 23

[image]

It was hard to know how long the snowstorm blew for, but when it finally stopped, the snow was so high that Meadowclan had to dig paths just to move around camp. Featherstar's death followed by Beetleshades had left the clan in a quiet and fearful place. Wildheart was too sick to accept his 9 lives as Starclan could not reach him, and left the clan in a strange position without a leader and deputy to guide them.

It was almost impossible to find prey and the fear of catching Black Cough was so strong that cats were jumping at the slightest sniffle. Berrypaw worked hard proving her knowledge and skills again and again as she tended to Wildheart and Wonderfrost and checked on the rest of her clan to make sure nobody was presenting any symptoms. Briarsong guided but let Berrypaw take control and represent her clan with pride. She wanted the apprentice to trust in herself and make choices she could be proud of. Briarsong had explained the situation to Ivybranch in the Starclan Training Area but hadn't checked back in since. Until she was sure the Black Cough had passed, Briarsong would stay in Meadowclan as to not bring it back with her to Moonclan. The first morning where the snow had stopped falling the ground sparkled like a millions of stars. If it weren't so dangerous it would almost be beautiful.

Briarsong was taking a break from cleaning out the den where the sick cats lay and was sitting at in camp watching the cats move about slowly and steadily as they tried to find places to push the snow. Meadowclan was a lot bigger than Briarsong had realized and had more Warriors than Moonclan. For being a clan that stuck to themselves they had secretly grown large and possibly powerful. It was hard to know now when they were all starving and cold, but when everyone was in tip top shape, they would be a force to be reckoned with.

"I'm so sorry," One of the Meadowclan Warriors dropped a very pathetic looking mouse. "Its all I could find."

"I'm not hungry." Briarsong nosed the mouse back over to the Warrior who looked so hungry and tired. Her ribs were showing and her pelt was drab. Without arguing the starving Warrior gluped down the small bit the mouse provided. Briarsong felt her belly growl with hunger but she couldn't imagine taking the small mouthful of mouse. She remembered the warm Leaf-bare when she lived inside the twoleg cave. A smile blossomed across her face at the memory of the warm fire, the little fish treats, and long slow pets along her spine. She missed the comforts of easy access to food and water. Just the idea of curling up next to Sully in the Hay Barn with Cookie, Morris and Mango nearby sounded so pleasant. If she listened hard enough, her brain could almost trick her into hearing the bark of Brody and the sounds of his flock.

"Thank you for staying here with us and helping Berrypaw. Once the snow melts a little we will get you home." A pretty smooth ginger she-cat came over and sat next to Briarsong.

"I am happy to be here and help, Leaftail." Briarsong reassured her.

"Do you think Wildheart will make it through the Black Cough?"

"Hard to say." Briarsong gave her honest reply. "I hope he does."

"We can't lose a leader and a deputy. I don't know what we will do." she shook her head. "Wildheart is my mate and I want him back for Meadowclan, but I always want him back to be with me and his kits."

"Who are your kits?"

"Snakepaw and Acornpaw. We lost our third to a eagle."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"Its one of the many struggles of living on the open hills." she let out a long breath. "Kits are so easy to snatch up for an eagle, and even a hawk. We try to teach the kits at a young age to stay out of open spaces, but kits will be kits. Some times they don't listen and they

want to go exploring or chasing after something."

"Who is your most Senior Warrior currently? If Wildheart doesn't make it I think someone should talk to whoever will most likely take their places."

"Stonetail and Nightwind are our most recent additions to the Elders Den. After them I would have to say it is probably Redmoon. She's Wildhearts sister and a very noble Warrior. The clan would follow her."

"Maybe you should speak to Redmoon?" Briarsong suggested. "Just so your clan has options should the worst happen."

"That is a good suggestion. Thank you." Leaftail touched noses with Briarsong before trudging off through the snow. Berrypaw snuck up behind and nudged Briarsong with one paw, startling her so badly she let out a small shriek and leapt into the air.

"I'm so sorry!" Berrypaw apologized, trying to cover her grin. "I didn't mean to scare you."

"What can I help you with?" Briarsong gave her shoulder a quick lick as if she hadn't been phased.

"I think Wildheart is waking up."

Briarsong followed Berrypaw back into the den and was delighted to see the deputy sitting up. Berrypaw got to work assessing her deputy and asking how he was feeling. Maybe things were looking up.

Three more sunhigh's past before it was safe enough to travel back across Meadowclan territory. Wonderfrost was making a full recovery but Wildheart had started to regress. Briarsong didn't suspect he would survive but Berrypaw could handle the situation herself. Since no more cats had shown symptoms, Briarsong felt safe leaving and heading back to Moonclan. Redmoon, Leaftail, and Mousewhisker escorted Briarsong through Meadowclan territory and over to the Mountainclan border. Moonclan didn't border Meadowclan so she would have to pass through Mountainclan to

get home.

"Please don't say anything to anyone about Featherstar and Wildheart." Redmoon said as they arrived at the border and stopped. "Until we get the situation sorted out we don't need the other clans knowing."

"Of course," Briarsong dipped her head in agreement. "Good luck." she turned and pushed her way through the snow and over the border. It took a long time to go a short distance and without a meal, Briarsong felt herself slowing down and tiring quickly. Looking behind her she couldn't see Meadowclan anymore but didn't feel like she was very far into Mountainclan either.

"Need some help?" Came a friendly and familiar voice. Bristlefrost leapt down from a hidden rock with Thornpaw right behind her.

"You look tired," Thornpaw observed. "Come with us back to camp for some food and traveling herbs before you head back to Moonclan."

"That sounds fantastic. I'm very hungry." Briarsong admitted. "How did you know I was coming through?"

"Starclan told me," Thronwpaw said proudly. "Falconstar said it was okay to bring you back to rest before sending you on your way."

"Thank Starclan."

Bristlefrost and Thronpaw led the way over the hidden rocks that Briarsong wouldn't have been able to see under the snow. The Mountainclan cats leapt from one rock to the other, moving a lost quicker through their territory. Briarsong wasn't a nimble and sheer footed as the Mountainclan cats, but she tried to keep up and avoid the thick snow banks.

"Here," Bristlefrost dropped a chipmunk down for Briarsong as she took a rest. "Doesn't look like you haven't eaten recently. Just like Meadowclan to not feed a cat who is helping them."

Briarsong was too hungry to argue and ate the vole quickly. The warm meal helped shake the chill and she leaned back against the

stone wall of camp and closed her eyes to enjoy the moment a little longer.

"I have some daisy leaf to give you back some strength, and some colts foot for your pads." Thornpaw arrived with his herbs and laid them down. Briarsong let the apprentice work on her pads with the colts foot and then she willingly ate the daisy leaf that he offered.

"Looks like someone should be getting their full name soon." Falconstar mused as he padded over to check in on what was going on. "Thornpaw tells me he is far surpassed the other apprentices in his training."

"He is a very smart and talented tom." Briarsong agreed. "He will be an amazing Medicine Cat for Mountainclan."

"He can't possibly need very much more training." Falconstar pushed. "At this point you're holding him back since he is forced to wait for the other two to catch up to where he is."

"Let's all just get through Leaf-bare and then when New-leaf comes I think everyone will be ready to receive their full names."

"Typical Moonclan - always wanting to control everyone." he snarled under his breath. "You've been fed, it is time to get on your way home."

"Thank you." Briarsong quickly got up and said goodbye to Thornpaw before following Bristlefrost out of camp and over to the Moonclan border. When they arrived Bristlefrost turned and nodded her silent thanks before disappearing back into Mountainclan. Briarsong pushed her way through the snow and back into Moonclan territory. She moved slowly but was making steady progress when she heard the crunching of paws against icy snow up ahead. Ears poked up from behind a snow drift and then yellow eyes followed and a black nose.

"Briarsong!" Appleblaze called. "Look who I found," he called back behind him and three more sets of ears appeared from behind the snow drift. The face of Thistletalon, Cloudpelt, and Patchpelt appeared a moment later all with smiles on their faces.

"Glad to see you coming home." Cloudpelt called. "We've been trying to hunt all day but the snow buried all the prey." Briarsong finally made her way around the snow bank and joined her clanmates. She noticed immediately they looked just as thin as the Meadowclan cats but they were in much higher spirits.

"I'll escort you back to camp." Patchpelt gave her a friendly lick on the ear. "Everyone else continue to try to hunt." Patchpelt led Briarsong down the trails the hunting patrol had made, leaving the three Warriors to attempt to catch something for the clan.

"How was Meadowclan?" Pathcpelt asked.

"They had Black Cough." Briarsong explained. Patchpelt shivered at the memory and shook his head sadly. The rest of the trip back to camp was quiet as the cats focused on not slipping and watching where they placed their paws. The idea of a warm Hay Barn and bowls of kittypet kibble sounded really nice all of a sudden.

Chapter 24

[image]

Berrypaw returned to her nightly trainings and as the snow warmed and turned into mud, the Medicine Cat apprentices proved every day their dedication and knowledge. Briarsong found herself getting antsy around camp and couldn't seem to feel at peace. The days went on as usual, kits were born, patrols went out, but she was stuck in a weird place where she wasn't a part of the clan, but wasn't an outsider. She longed to feel the safety and security of the Hay Barn and to lounge around in the sun without a care in the world. Sully came by every evening to drop off a mouse and say goodbye before she started training the apprentices, and these fleeting moments only made her long for more.

Fernwhisper was actively avoiding Briarsong but never hesitated to glare or made a snide remark if she was within ear shot. Lizzardkit was practically abandoned by his mother and Eveningmist took up the role as step-mother to the little grey and white tom, just as she had done for Cinderstar's kits. It was on the first day where there was no more snow on the ground that Briarsong approached Ivybranch and announced,

"The apprentices are ready."

"I think you are right." Ivybranch nodded in agreement. "We shall take them to the Seeing Stream for them to receive their Medicine Cat Names."

"Its strange to think its coming to an end."

"Yes. Especially when we have spent so much time with them and yet they will not be cats we see day to day. I will enjoy seeing them at Gatherings and at the Seeing Stream in the future. They are all

three absolutely wonderful."

"I think it will be really good for the forest to have united Medicine Cats." Briarsong said thoughtfully. "It's what the clans need."

"What about you?" Ivybranch flicked her tail and bopped Briarsong over her ear. "Are you and Sully going home?"

"Yes." Briarsong felt a wave of relief saying it out loud for the first time. "My job here is done and I am not ready to sit in the Elders Den until I die."

"I'll miss you." Ivybranch whispered. "You're more than a mentor, your my best friend."

"I'll miss you too." Briarsong licked her head and purred. "I won't ever forget you. One day we will see each other again in Starclan."

"It will be nice to be reunited with Flowertail, my siblings and you."

"Not anytime soon I hope?" Briarsong laughed.

"Not anytime soon." Ivybranch echoed with a laugh.

Briarsong pulled Sully aside with a flick of her tail and the long haired tom joined her, Ivybranch and Dawnstar in the leaders den.

"I want to start by saying thank you for your loyalty and friendship Sully." Dawnstar said to the tom. "You came into Moonclan and threw yourself into our ways. You hunted next to our best hunter, you patrolled a territory you knew nothing about, and you fed a clan of cats you had no obligation to feed. Briarsong is so lucky to have met such an amazing tom like you."

"Er...uh...thank you." Sully's voice caught in this throat and he looked over at Briarsong who smiled proudly back at him.

"Please know you are always welcome in Moonclan, should you choose to return. As a symbolic gesture of our appreciation and in hopes that when you pass on you can join us in Starclan, I would like to bestow on you a Warriors name." Sully let out a audible gasp and Briarsong's eyes opened wide. She looked over at Sully who

held his head high, his tail wrapped firmly around his paws, and his chin forward. "I, Dawnstar of Moonclan, call upon my Warrior Ancestors to look down upon this cat as a friend of Moonclan. He has proven his loyalty and respect for our ways over six moons and it is my hope that by giving him a Warriors name he will be welcomed into Starclan as one of us. Sully, from this moment forward, I give you the name Kestrelmoon. Kestrel for your beautiful pelt and skill at hunting, and moon so that you remember the clan who loves you." she bent down and touched noses with the tom. "Briarsong," Dawnstar turned to her and Briarsong tried to hide her tears of pride for Sully. "I have already apologized for exiling you but if I hadn't, you wouldn't have met such an amazing tom. I know you love him but your loyalty to your clan never wavered for a second. I am so glad you came home and that I got to see you again. I miss you already but know I will see you again in Starclan."

"Thank you Dawnstar," Briarsong dipped her head to hide her tears. "I love Moonclan and would do anything for you."

"I know you would." Dawnstar purred. "And you have proven that."

"Tonight we visit Seeing Stream with the apprentices," Ivybranch announced to the group. "Tomorrow we will escort you and Sully to the border to say goodbye."

"Yes," Briarsong confirmed. There was silence for a moment as each cat looked at one another, trying to not cry.

"You better get yourselves ready to travel to Seeing Stream," Dawnstar finally huffed. "Before we all turn into weeping Queens."

"Are you ready to go home?" Sully leaned over and asked as they exited the Leaders Den. "Are you sure you're okay with leaving?"

"I've never been so sure." Briarsong said with a smile. "My job here is done and I want to go back to the Farm with you, as your mate." Sully purred and gave her ear a lick.

"Maybe we could even talk about kits?" he asked half jokingly.

"I'm too old for kits," she gave him a gentle shove. "I just want to lay in the sun and be fat and lazy. Maybe catch a mouse or two."

Ivybranch stood next to Briarsong and the two she-cats gave a last look at each other before crossing into Smokeclan. They made their way through the old Treeclan territory with ease until they reached the Mountainclan border where Rainpaw and Thornpaw had already met up and were waiting impatiently.

"What took so long?" Thornpaw muttered. "We might miss the moon."

"There is plenty of time." Ivybranch laughed at the eager apprentice. The four cats crossed into Mountainclan and then headed over to the Seeing Stream where Berrypaw sat waiting. She wasn't as timid and afraid as when she had first started training but looked a lot more grown up and confident. The three apprentices bounced around and Briarsong enjoyed seeing them so happy about their futures. They let the apprentices frolic and play for a few minutes before calling them back to sit by the Seeing Stream, where the stars sparkled like snowflakes in the water.

"Take a sip of the water," Briarsong instructed. "And then find a comfortable stop to curl up and we will see you soon."

Thornpaw was the first to push his way forward and take a big gulp of the fresh cold water. When he lifted his head up water droplets hit the heads of the other two apprentices. Berrypaw followed with a more restrained drink and finally Rainpaw with a hesitant lap. The three apprentices curled up next to each other and Briarsong watched as their eyes fluttered until they all three fell into a peaceful sleep.

"See you on the other side," she winked at Ivybranch and took a sip for the last time.

When she opened her eyes next Briarsong was standing next to Ivybranch and the three apprentices were wide eyed as they looked around them and saw their Warriors Ancestors. Briarsong recognized Pebblestone, Windwhisker, Cloverclaw, and Flowertail but there were other cats she didn't know. She searched hard

throughout the gathering of stary cats and when her eye caught one particular young she-cat she smiled ear to ear. Rosethorn was among the cats and she was beautiful. Her scabby skin, bald pelt, and overall sickly appearance was gone and she was a gorgeous sleek black she-cat with a few scars. She gave a mischievous wink but didn't say anything.

"I Ivybranch, call upon my Warrior Ancestors to look down on this young apprentice Rainpaw. He has trained hard and proven his knowledge and skills at being Smokeclan's first Medicine Cat. Rainpaw, do you accept the responsibilities to care for and heal your clan?"

"I do."

"Then by the power invested in me, I give you your full name. Rainpaw, from this moment forward you will be known as Rainbright a full Medicine Cat of Smokeclan."

There was cheering and chanting for Rainbright before Briarsong stepped forward and smiled warmly at Berrypaw who she had grown particularly fond of.

I Briarsong, call upon my Warrior Ancestors to look down on this young apprentice Berrypaw. She has trained hard and proven her knowledge and skills at being Meadowclan's Medicine Cat. Berrypaw, do you accept the responsibilities to care for and heal your clan?"

"I do."

"Then by the power invested in me, I give you your full name. Berrypaw, from this moment forward you will be known as Berrystream a full Medicine Cat of Meadowclan."

Ivybranch waited for the cheering to slow before calling forward Thornpaw. The tom was practically jumping out of his pelt with excitement.

"I Ivybranch, call upon my Warrior Ancestors to look down on this young apprentice Thornpaw. He has trained hard and proven his

knowledge and skills at being Mounainclans Medicine Cat. Thornpaw, do you accept the responsibilities to care for and heal your clan?"

"I do."

"Then by the power invested in me, I give you your full name. Thornpaw, from this moment forward you will be known as Thornblink a full Medicine Cat of Mountainclan."

Briarsong stood aside as the apprentices went to meet their ancestors. She watched with pride as they were all three welcomed into the realm of Starclan. Rosethorn padded over with her stary pelt glowing brightly.

"Hello again friend," she smiled.

"Glad to see you here."

"I don't stay in Starclan full time." Rosethron gave a casual shrug. "There is a lot of sky to explore. But I always come back to visit. Couldn't miss this wonderful moment to support the new Mountainclan Medicine Cat."

"Briarsong," Cloverclaw called. Briarsong turned and was stunned to see all the Starclan Medicine cats looking directly at her. "You have served your clan with love, strength, loyalty, and pride. You never wavered in your duties and you came when you were called back." he smiled proudly and purred. "As as thank you for all you have done, Starclan has decided to rid you of your Medicine Cat Duties and Vows. This has never been done before but Starclan has decided if any cat deserved a second life, it was you."

"Do you Briarsong," Flowertail stepped forward her blind eyes meeting Briarsog's green ones. "Accept the responsibility and understand that you will no longer be Moonclans Medicine Cat, bound to serve your clan and follow strict rules?"

"I do." Briarsong squeaked out.

"Then by the power of Starclan, we revoke your Medicine Cat title and free you of your vows. You will no longer be able to speak with

Starclan directly, you will no longer be asked to serve your clan, and you no longer must uphold a vow of abstinence."

"When you die you will be welcomed into Starclan with open paws," Cloverclaw added. "as you have earned your stars in your life after death." One at a time the Medicine Cats stepped forward and touched noses with Briarsong. before her vision was blurry with tears. When she could finally see again she was at the Seeing Stream, and Ivybranch was licking her shoulder while the new Medicine Cats of the forest sat vigil near her to show their support for her loss.

Epilog

[image]

Briarsong and Sully made their way along the Smokeclan and Mountainclan border. The goodbyes had been hard but Briarsong was feeling more free than she ever had before. For once there was no question in her mind where her loyalties lie and what she should do. She as no longer a Moonclan Medicine Cat and she was free to love Sully and to enjoy the remainder of her life on the Farm. The excitement at seeing Brody and Cookie again spurred her forward with a little bounce in her step. As they got closer to the neutral area where the death berry bushes grew, Briarsong thought she smelt something on the wind. Cat's weren't supposed to be around the neutral area for fear of accidently eating a berry or licking its seeds off their paws and dying. When she raised her head and sniffed again, she could clearly pick up a scent that didn't belong out in the woods.

"I smell kits and mothers milk," Briarsong looked at Sully. "That's impossible though. Queens and kits don't leave camp, and they definitely don't wander out to where bushes of death berries grow."

"I smell someone too." Sully agreed. "maybe its a rogue or a kittypet who got lost?"

Picking up her pace, Briarsong pushed her way into the clearing where the bushes loomed like dark shadows and was shocked to see there was a queen and three kits. She blinked dumbly, so surprised she couldn't move. A silver she-cat with dark gray markings and her three very young kits beside her. One was a creamy white, one was a silvery gray like its mother and the third was a pale ginger. The she-cat looked up, tears clearly dripping from her eyes like rain.

"I hoped you would come through here," she whispered. "I prayed to Starclan you would come through this way."

"I'm sorry. Who are you?"

"You probably don't recognize me. I'm Swiftshine of Smokeclan. I was Eveningmist and Patchpelts kit. The last time you saw me I was Swiftpaw."

"I do remember you." Briarsong nodded, remembering how she watched the young kit become an apprentice too young. She hadn't realized she was in Smokeclan, but was far more concerned with why she had three little kits out in cold.

"You have to take them with you." Swiftshine cried. "Please. Take them to wherever you are going and don't bring them back." the queen was begging, fear and panic clear in her blue eyes. Briarsong looked at each kit in turn and they seemed healthy and fat as they waddled around like ducklings.

"Okay hold on a moment." Briarsong tried to calm her down. "Why do you need us to take your kits?"

"You don't understand and there isn't enough time. He will be looking for me by now and its only a mater of time until he finds me. You have to take my kits with you. If you don't take them they will die in Smokeclan."

"What's happened to Smokeclan?" Sully inquired.

"There isn't time!" Swiftshine practically screamed. "For Starclans sake! Take them! Take them and save them."

"What are their names?" Briarsong asked, quickly evaluating each kit in turn. They were far too young to be out of the nursery, let alone out of camp. They were tiny little fluff balls letting out tired meows.

"I didn't name them." Swiftshine admitted shamefully. "If I named them I would love them too much to let you take them. Please. Don't tell them about the clans or me." the she-cat bent down and gave each kit a lick on the head and a gentle nudge with her nose. She looked up and met Briarsongs eyes. Briarsong saw the desperation in them. Swiftshine turned and bolted like a cat running for their life. She didn't look back, she didn't hesitate, she was a blur of silver and then she was gone. Sully was rounding up

the three kits and he looked concerned.

"They are far too young to be away from their mother." he admitted. "I don't know if they will even make it."

"We have to at least try." Briarsong picked up the weakest of the three kits, the little creamy white one, and Sully picked up the pale ginger kit and the third wobbled next to them as they slowly made their way out of the clearing and back towards where the sun rose. Briarsong planned out how they would travel with three young kits and the best way to rotate who was carried and who had to walk. Right when she thought she was done with the forest and clan cats Starclan had sent her one last little task. The kit she was carried mewed and she tried to swing it gently to rock it to sleep as she and Sully padded out of the clan territories and started their journey back home.